

*IT MUST BE SO*: RECONSIDERING THE DRAMATIC AGENCIES IN GEORGE  
FRIDERIC HANDEL'S *JEPHTHA*

BY

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PROGRAM | *JEPHTHA*

ACT I

1. *Overture, Menuet*

Scene I: Zebul, With His Brethren, and Company

2. *Accompagnato*, “It Must Be So” (Zebul)
3. *Aria*, “Pour Forth No More Unheeded Prayers” (Zebul)
4. *Chorus*, “No More to Ammon’s God and King”

Scene II: Enter Jephtha, Storgè, and Company

5. *Recitative*, “But Jephtha Comes” (Zebul, Jephtha)
6. *Aria*, “Virtue My Soul Shall Still Embrace” (Jephtha)
7. *Recitative*, “Twill be a Painful Separation” (Storgè)
8. *Aria*, “In Gentle Murmurs will I Mourn” (Storgè)

Scene III: Enter Hamor and Iphis

9. *Recitative*, “Happy this Embassy, My Charming Iphis” (Hamor)
10. *Aria*, “Dull Delay, in Piercing Anguish” (Hamor)
11. *Recitative*, “Ill Suits the Voice of Love” (Iphis)
12. *Aria*, “Take the Heart You Fondly Gave” (Iphis)
13. *Recitative*, “I Go; My Soul” (Hamor)
14. *Duet*, “These Labours Past, how Happy We” (Iphis, Hamor)

Scene IV: Jephtha, Alone

15. *Recitative*, “What Mean these Doubtful Fancies of the Brain” (Jephtha)
16. *Accompagnato*, “If, Lord, Sustained by thy Almighty Power” (Jephtha)

Enter Israelites, and Company

17. *Recitative*, “Tis said. Attend ye, Chiefs” (Jephtha)
18. *Chorus*, “O God, Behold Our Sore Distress”

Scene V: Storgè, Alone

19. *Recitative*, “Some Dire Event Hangs o’er our Heads” (Storgè)
20. *Aria*, “Scenes of Horror, Scenes of Woe” (Storgè)

Scene VI: Enter Iphis

21. *Recitative*, “Say, my dear Mother” (Iphis, Storgè)

22. *Aria*, “The Smiling Dawn of Happy Days” (Iphis)

Scene VII: Enter Zebul, Jephtha, and Company

23. *Recitative*, “Such, Jephtha, was the Haughty King’s Reply” (Zebul, Jephtha)

24. *Chorus*, “When His Loud Voice in Thunder Spoke”

## ACT II

Scene I: Enter Hamor, Iphis, and Company

25. *Recitative*, “Glad Tidings of Great Joy” (Hamor)

26. *Chorus*, “Cherub and Seraphim, Unbodied Forms”

27. *Aria*, “Up the Dreadful Steep Ascending” (Hamor)

28. *Recitative*, “Tis well, Haste Ye Maidens” (Iphis)

29. *Aria*, “Tune the Soft Melodious Lute” (Iphis)

Scene II: Enter Zebul, Jephtha, Hamor, and Company

30. *Recitative*, “Again Heaven Smiles” (Zebul)

31. *Aria*, “Freedom Now Once More” (Zebul)

32. *Recitative*, “Zebul, thy Deeds were Valiant” (Jephtha)

33. *Aria*, “His Mighty Arm” (Jephtha)

34. *Chorus*, “In Glory High”

Scene III: Enter Iphis, Storgè, and Company

35. *Symphony*

36. *Recitative*, “Hail, Glorious Conqueror” (Iphis)

37. *Aria*, “Welcome as the Cheerful Light” (Iphis)

38. *Chorus of Boys*, “Welcome as the Cheerful Light”

39. *Recitative*, “Horror, Confusion” (Jephtha)

40. *Aria*, “Open thy Marble Jaws, O Tomb” (Jephtha)

41. *Recitative*, “Why is my Brother thus Afflicted” (Zebul, Jephtha)

42. *Accompagnato*, “First Perish Thou” (Storgè)

43. *Recitative*, “If Such thy Cruel Purpose” (Hamor)

44. *Aria*, “On Me in Blind Mistaken Zeal” (Hamor)

45. *Quartet*, “O Spare your Daughter” (Storgè, Hamor, Jephtha, Zebul)

Scene IV: Enter Iphis

46. *Recitative*, “Such News Flies Swift” (Iphis)

47. *Accompagnato*, “For Joys so Vast” (Iphis)
48. *Aria*, “Happy They” (Iphis)
49. *Accompagnato*, “Deeper and Deeper Still” (Jephtha)
50. *Chorus*, “How Dark, O Lord, are thy Decrees”

### ACT III

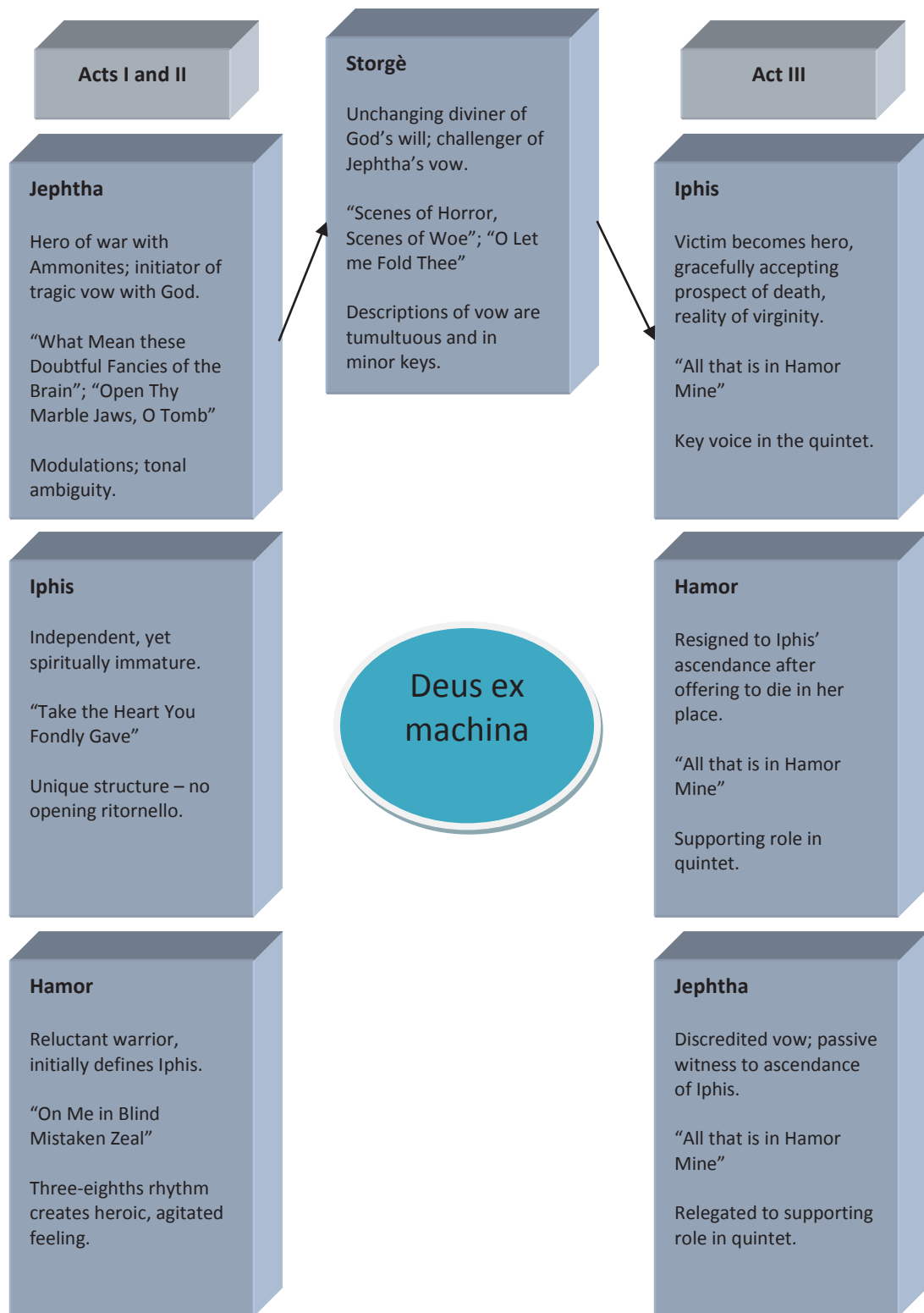
#### Scene I: Jephtha, Iphis, Priests, and Company

51. *Arioso*, “Hide thou thy Hated Beams” (Jephtha)
52. *Accompagnato*, “A Father, Offering Up” (Jephtha)
53. *Aria*, “Waft Her, Angels, Through the Skies” (Jephtha)
54. *Accompagnato*, “Ye Sacred Priests” (Iphis)
55. *Aria*, “Farewell, ye Limpid Springs” (Iphis)
56. *Chorus*, “Doubtful Fear and Reverend Awe”
57. *Sinfonia*
58. *Recitative*, “Rise, Jephtha” (Angel)
59. *Aria*, “Happy Iphis, shalt thou Live” (Angel)
60. *Aria*, “For ever Blessed Be” (Jephtha)
61. *Chorus*, “Theme Sublime”

#### Scene II: Enter Zebul, Storgè, Hamor, and Company

62. *Recitative*, “Let me Congratulate” (Zebul)
63. *Aria*, “Laud her all, ye Virgin Train” (Zebul)
64. *Recitative*, “O Let me Fold Thee” (Storgè)
65. *Aria*, “Sweet as Sight to the Blind” (Storgè)
66. *Recitative*, “With Transport, Iphis” (Hamor)
67. *Aria*, “Tis Heaven’s All-Ruling Power” (Hamor)
68. *Recitative*, “My Faithful Hamor” (Iphis)
69. *Aria*, “Freely I to Heaven Resign (Iphis)
70. *Quintet*, “All that is in Hamor Mine” (Iphis, Hamor, Storgè, Jephtha, Zebul)
71. *Chorus*, “Ye House of Gilead”

Figure 1. Diagram of the *Jephtha* narrative.



## Introduction

*Jephtha*, the final oratorio by George Frideric Handel (1685-1759), contains some of the composer's most compelling music. The piece is also one of music's most enduring enigmas, as audiences from Handel's day to our own have struggled to understand the composer's use of unconventional compositional choices - especially a drastic stylistic change in the third act - to make a theologically unpalatable Old Testament story about a seemingly unsympathetic God acceptable to contemporary British audiences. Handel and his librettist, Thomas Morell, succeed by creating a unique narrative that uses Jephtha's wife, Storgè, as the primary dramatic agent to describe the transformation of her daughter Iphis from the story's victim into its hero, and the concurrent transformation of the eponymous main character into its misguided anti-hero.

*Jephtha* draws upon models from Greek and French classical tragedies to leaven a flat biblical reflection on the power of God into a fully realized drama about the folly and heroism of humanity. Handel skillfully weaves parallels from the Greek and French versions of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the biblical Abraham and Isaac story, and the emerging popular styles of melodrama and she-tragedy into a narrative tapestry that appears to signal his own transition into the new *style galant*. This paper discusses the clues embedded in the oratorio that point to these conjectures.

## Chapter 1.

### 1.1 Musical and Dramatic Issues in George Frideric Handel's *Jephtha*

*Jephtha* is an adaptation of a story in the Book of Judges from the Old Testament. The Israelites, under the leadership of Zebul, ask the military commander Jephtha to deliver them from Ammonite tyranny. Jephtha agrees to fight but is doubtful of victory. He decides to make an agreement with God that if Israel triumphs on the battlefield, he will sacrifice the first thing he sees upon his return.

Jephtha is soon victorious over the Ammonites and returns to his homeland a hero. Unfortunately, the first “thing” he sees is his young daughter. Jephtha realizes that he must sacrifice his daughter, who is unnamed in the story, to fulfill his vow. He takes his daughter to the mountains and carries out an unspecified sacrifice. The Book of Judges implies that the Israelites commemorated this extraordinary event annually thereafter.

Handel composed *Jephtha* at a time when prominent eighteenth-century thinkers such as Alexander Pope dismissed the Judges story and other scriptural narratives as barbaric and irrelevant.<sup>1</sup> Pope was among a group of thinkers called Deists, who rejected biblical passages that did not correspond to their view of “natural religion.” Natural religion was a philosophy that justified God’s existence through evidential, rational thought. The Deists insisted upon literal interpretations of scripture and rejected narratives that did not reflect eighteenth-century British intellectual mores.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Nott, “ ‘Heroick Vertue’: Handel and Morell’s ‘Jephtha’ in the Light of Eighteenth-Century Biblical Commentary and Other Sources,” *Music and Letters* 77 (May 1996): 196.



Pope and his colleagues were particularly skeptical of biblical miracles and apparitions meant to illustrate God's intervention in human affairs. The Deists believed that God's existence was found in nature, not in books of revealed wisdom. They consequently dismissed the idea that God interjected Himself in human history as a sort of monotheistic *Deus ex machina* in a burning bush or white cloud. We observe this philosophy in Thomas Jefferson's adaptation of the Bible, in which he removes all references to Jesus' supernatural activities. Jefferson viewed Jesus as a philosopher rather than God incarnate.

Deism had political as well as spiritual implications in Handel's time. Until the Enlightenment (excluding the Cromwell "Commonwealth" era), many British subjects believed in the divine right of kings, meaning that the king and his familial successors ruled the country by God's command rather than popular will. The British monarchs therefore possessed unlimited political power. These same monarchs served as head of the Church of England, the state church after Henry VIII's formal break with Clement VII's Roman Catholic Church. The Deists' refusal to accept God's temporal interventions led them to question, and ultimately reject, the principle of monarchical divine rights. The rejection not only challenged the king's political power, but also challenged the Church of England's monopoly on all things spiritual.<sup>2</sup>

Natural religion thus created a dilemma for the orthodox Anglican establishment. The eighteenth-century English church held a diversity of beliefs, yet acknowledged the Bible as the inerrant "word of God."<sup>3</sup> The wholesale rejection of key Old Testament

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<sup>2</sup> James A. Herrick, *The Radical Rhetoric of the English Deists: the Discourse of Skepticism, 1680-1750* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 5-7.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Nott, "'Heroick Vertue': Handel and Morell's 'Jephtha' in the Light of Eighteenth-Century Biblical Commentary and Other Sources," *Music and Letters* 77 (May 1996): 195.

passages by Pope and the Deists threatened to weaken the theological foundation of the church's spiritual and temporal power. Handel's librettist, an Anglican priest named Thomas Morell, was eager to use *Jephtha* as a "...contribution to the defence of Christianity."<sup>4</sup>

Morell and similarly minded Anglicans often used allegorical interpretation to reconcile their view of a benevolent God with the occasionally problematic elements of the Old Testament. God's acts of severe justice among the Israelites (such as turning Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for watching the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah) became palatable for the Anglicans as symbols of broader moral or spiritual meaning. But the story of Jephtha with its subject of filial sacrifice presented unique problems. The Deists were correct when they claimed that Jephtha murdered his daughter as a grisly offering.<sup>5</sup> How could British civil society accept sacrificial murder as a religious value?

Even the Genesis story of Abraham and Isaac – the other prominent sacrificial narrative in the Old Testament – did not pose for Handel's contemporaries the moral conundrum of God sanctioning the actual death of a child. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, just as Jephtha, in fulfillment of his vow, is required to sacrifice his unnamed daughter. But God saves Isaac at the last moment by sending an angel to Earth while the Book of Judges describes Jephtha sacrificing his daughter without any intervention from God. In fact, God does not appear at all in this section of the narrative. If God does not save the daughter from death, then God implicitly approves human sacrifice.

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Nott, "'Heroick Vertue': Handel and Morell's 'Jephtha' in the Light of Eighteenth-Century Biblical Commentary and Other Sources," *Music and Letters* 77 (May 1996): 196.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Staves, "Jephtha's Vow Reconsidered," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 71 (December 2004): 654.

Morell and Handel realized the limits of allegory with *Jephtha* and instead changed the entire narrative to suit their contemporary world and theology. Morell's libretto for *Jephtha* follows the biblical narrative until the moment of sacrifice. The librettist then adopts a *Deus ex machina* recourse in the form of an angel to save Jephtha's daughter Iphis from death. No longer does the vengeful and unflinching God demand the life of Iphis as a quid-pro-quo for military victory. The daughter instead promises her perpetual virginity.

Morell's interpretation reinforces the characters' love of God, family, and country in a narrative designed to assure orthodox believers that Jephtha's story had intrinsic value for eighteenth-century British society. Handel himself played a significant role in updating the story. The final chorus of Act II portrays theologically confused Israelites rationalizing what they believe to be God's dark demands upon Jephtha. Morell's drafts show that the chorus was to initially proclaim, "What God ordains, is right." Handel scratched this line and replaced it with the Deist paraphrase, "Whatever is, is right."<sup>6</sup> The change cleverly attributes the Deist view that only logical and rational things justify the existence of God to a group of people who fundamentally misunderstand the role of God in human history. Handel may agree on one level with the Deists that God would never demand the terrible sacrifice that Jephtha mistakenly believes the Almighty wants, but the composer also makes it clear that Jephtha's anguish speaks more to the weakness of humans than to the malevolence of God.

Morell and Handel also linked theology and politics for an audience unsettled by Deist challenges to the idea that loyalty to country and loyalty to God were synonymous.

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<sup>6</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten, HWV 70*, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 261.

Steeped in a society that believed a “Protestant Wind” had sealed the fate of the Spanish Armada in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Morell and Handel use the symbiotic relationship between God and Israel in the Old Testament as a proxy to reinforce the orthodox Anglican view of God and the British state.

More importantly from an artistic standpoint, Handel and Morell add dramatically important characters to the sparse scriptural narrative. Iphis; Zebul, Jephtha’s brother; Storgè; and Hamor, Iphis’ betrothed, are unique to the oratorio. The biblical narrative acknowledges the existence of Jephtha’s daughter, but she remains nameless and lacks dimension. She is more a bartering object to advance the plot than a three-dimensional human being.

Handel’s music carries the transformation of the story of Jephtha in a manner that clearly supports the emergence of Iphis as the hero of a story in which she did not originally appear.

The first two acts are typical of Handel’s late oratorio style. The overture is a modified binary form with French-style dotted eighth and sixteenth notes. The linear plot develops within *semplice* and *accompagnato* recitatives. The characters reflect upon the dramatic action through a wide array of duets, trios, and *da capo* arias. The Greek-style choruses reflect the Israelites’ collective interpretation of the characters’ actions. There are also several choral invocations to the Hebrew God. Handel often sets these choruses in *stile antico*, thereby giving them an air of ecclesial piety.<sup>7</sup>

The third act’s opening numbers are also typical Handel. Jephtha, acknowledging his unenviable task, sings the *da capo* aria “Waft her, angels, through the skies,” arguably

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<sup>7</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten, HWV 70*, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 1-266.

the best-known excerpt from the oratorio. Iphis then sings a poignant farewell aria in a pastoral 12/8 meter. Handel's compositional style changes in surprising ways, however, after the daughter's aria. The subsequent binary-form symphony does not include counterpoint typical of the late Baroque period. In fact, the style is more characteristic of *style galant*. This short symphony introduces the *Deus ex machina* event. The comparatively simple musical language seems to understate the moment's dramatic significance. The transparent *style galant* endures until the oratorio's final cadence.<sup>8</sup>

The musical language of *Jephtha*'s third act does not provide a triumphant resolution. Handel often concludes his oratorios with extroverted, festal music glorifying the hero's successes. *Jephtha*'s conclusion, by contrast, is decidedly introspective. Some performers and scholars believe that Handel's failing health prompted him to complete the oratorio in a simpler style.<sup>9</sup> Others believe that the composer may have changed the musical style for dramatic purposes. Still others believe that Handel was merely trying his hand at a newly popular style.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the reason, Handel's use of the stylistic shift to outline his new approach to *Jephtha* raises significant challenges for both audiences and performers. If the *style galant* corresponds to the angel's extra-biblical entry, what is the dramatic significance of this intercessory angel? How does the music of the third act relate to the music of the first two acts if the style is so different? Could the musical shift in Act III tell us something about the changing impact of each character in the drama? How can performers satisfactorily pace the unfolding of this drama with such a style shift?

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<sup>8</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten, HWV 70*, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 267-369.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Nott, "'Heroick Vertue': Handel and Morell's 'Jephtha' in the Light of Eighteenth-Century Biblical Commentary and Other Sources," *Music and Letters* 77 (May 1996): 205.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

It is just such musical and narrative challenges that have made *Jephtha* one of the most infrequently performed Handel works. Even with Handel and Morell's reimagining, the story of Jephtha contains unavoidably difficult elements, starting with the fact that Jephtha's vow is a head-scratcher. He swears, in a fit of insecurity and thoughtlessness, to sacrifice the first thing he sees if victorious over the Ammonites. Modern society recognizes the value of personal and spiritual sacrifice, especially on behalf of civic well-being, but is offended at the notion of corporal and sexual injury. Audiences and performers confronted by Jephtha's agreement with God are left to wonder why a renowned warrior unilaterally seeks divine intervention before the battle begins. Neither the Judges narrative nor the Morell adaptation suggests that Jephtha's bargain constitutes a last resort. His private doubts and subsequent vow establish questions about his heroic credentials, creating a jarring paradigm shift for those who expect the glorified heroism of a Solomon or Judas Maccabaeus.

Then there is the third-act *Deus ex machina* device that Morell and Handel use to rewrite the grisly ending of the biblical tale. On the one hand, the *Deus ex machina* solution answers the Deist movement's rejection of biblical sacrifice narratives by affirming that God, in His infinite goodness, ultimately can intervene, and impart compassion rather than retribution upon Iphis and the rest of humanity. Such interventions may contradict the Deist disdain for miraculous endings, but are nevertheless dramatically convenient because they address unresolved character crises and provide positive, anxiety-free conclusions to dramatic works.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Nott, " 'Heroick Vertue': Handel and Morell's 'Jephtha' in the Light of Eighteenth-Century Biblical Commentary and Other Sources," *Music and Letters* 77 (May 1996): 206.

They also create credibility problems. Literary critics from the eighteenth century to the present deride the *Deus ex machina* convention as cheap and uninspired.<sup>12</sup> It remains difficult to justify in our modern age, especially to those who do not believe in divine intervention. *Deus ex machina* recourses threaten to render the drama unconvincing if the audience is not able to suspend its disbelief. The technique also complicates the narrative by leaving the audience uncertain of key issues, such as whether the ending clarifies Jephtha's sometimes murky view of God, or whether Jephtha's daughter can still be perceived a heroine while averting death and embracing virginity.

The contradictions of adapting a religious story with archaic social values to a different era remain difficult to untangle using traditional interpretations of biblical stories about God's intervention in human history. Given the fact that modern representations will take place outside of Handelian cultural paradigms, the unavoidable contradictions may need to be overcome with a new approach to the story and the oratorio. One such new approach may be to suggest that Handel and Morell viewed the character of Jephtha not as the hero of the oratorio, but as a connection to the known story that sets the stage for a new narrative celebrating the courage and loyalty of the true hero - Iphis.

Morell portrays Jephtha as a man consumed by contradictions. Introduced to the audience as a warrior, confident that "goodness will make him great," Jephtha's fortitude wavers in the face of the impending battle. He makes his bargain with God to secure a military victory over the Ammonites. God does not speak to Jephtha or acknowledge the

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Staves, "Jephtha's Vow Reconsidered," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 71 (December 2004): 653.

agreement, but Jephtha nonetheless assumes that the Almighty is with him and goes off to war. Jephtha does not tell his family about the agreement until after victory is secured, and the deal tragically backfires when he sets eyes on his daughter and assumes that God now demands that he kill the girl. God is again silent. Jephtha remains convinced that he is correctly interpreting the will of God and prepares his daughter for sacrifice. By the third act and just prior to the *Deus ex machina* intervention, Jephtha's character is broken; guilt has consumed him.<sup>13</sup>

Iphis, meanwhile, frightened yet courageous, accepts her fate. The angelic intervention liberates her from death, but not from the vow itself. She gladly accepts her perpetual chastity with faith and confidence.<sup>14</sup> Though Handel and Morell give Jephtha a short *arioso* after the angel's intervention, thanking God for his daughter's deliverance, the character never again speaks individually.<sup>15</sup> He is a witness to Iphis' rescue, but not as a faithful hero. Jephtha stands in marked contrast to Handel's other lead characters and their virtues - Solomon's wisdom or Judas Maccabaeus' unmitigated conquests. Jephtha is instead a pseudo-tragic figure who fails to achieve greatness and respect.

Handel and Morell's innovative treatment of the character Jephtha ultimately allows the oratorio to become a bold, dramatic work that impressed eighteenth and nineteenth century audiences while propagating the indispensable British virtues of God, family and state.

The four surviving program books describe *Jephtha* as "An Oratorio or Sacred Drama," a recurrent description of Handel's works in the genre. The subtitle implies that

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<sup>13</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten, HWV 70*, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 267-69.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 331-38.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 298.



the oratorio possesses dramatic qualities characteristic of opera, particularly the Italian opera in which the composer was so masterful. Handel and Morell also divide the oratorio into opera-like “Acts” in lieu of the customary “Parts.” As in other Handel dramatic oratorios, each act contains minor stage directions that explain and underscore the dramatic conflicts taking place in the piece. For example, either the composer or the librettist instructs Jephtha’s character to enter and exit at certain moments. The instructions seem to separate Jephtha from the other singers, providing a physical manifestation of his isolation from friends and family in the aftermath of his disastrous vow. The various theatrical producers of *Jephtha* sold program books to the audience, but interestingly omitted most of Handel’s stage directions. The audience books also replaced the term “Acts” with the more traditional “Parts.” It seems logical to conclude that the stage directions were intended exclusively for the performers rather than as a means of providing dramatic clues to the audience.

There is no evidence that Handel or Morell ever translated their operatic terminology and stage directions into a fully staged version of the oratorio. It took almost two hundred years, well into the twentieth century, for anyone to stage the piece. The time lag probably reflected ambivalence among producers about the dramatic value of the oratorio. There were also undoubtedly creative and practical issues ranging from whether the music and drama lent themselves to interdisciplinary performance, to whether a staged oratorio would sell tickets or generate interest among conservative non-profit boards.

## 1.2 The Performance History of *Jephtha*

*Jephtha* received seven performances during Handel's lifetime. The first three occurred in February and March of 1752 with the following cast: John Beard (Jephtha), Caterina Galli (Storgè), Giulia Frasi (Iphis), Brent (Hamor), Wass (Zebul), and an unnamed boy soprano (Angel). Handel revived the piece twice in 1753. According to Handel scholar Winton Dean, the composer inserted for these performances a borrowing from his *Agrippina*, number 31 in the middle of Iphis' recitative "Heav'n smiles once more," resetting the first three lines for Zebul's bass voice. Handel also substituted the quintet for the air "Freely I to Heav'n resign" and cut Hamor's preceding air (67). The 1756 revival included Storgè's part transposed for a high soprano, likely Rosa Curioni. Her name appears on the 1756 conductor's score. Handel's notes show that the 1758 production (the final production during the composer's lifetime) included "new additions and alterations," but the libretto differs from that of 1753 only in the omission of *O let me fold thee* and *Sweet as sight to the blind*. Beard and Frasi revived their respective roles, while Cecilia Young sang Hamor; Cassandra Frederick, Storgè; and Samuel Champness, Zebul.<sup>16</sup>

*Jephtha* enjoyed frequent revivals in the late eighteenth century, both in London and in provincial areas. Dean notes that there were successful productions in Hereford (1762), Gloucester (1772), Leicester (1774), Oxford (1774), Salisbury, and elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 619.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 620.

Many undated eighteenth-century librettos also survive. The oratorio fell out of fashion by the early nineteenth century, though occasional revivals occurred in Germany (produced by the Berlin Singakademie) and England (with the Sacred Harmonic Society, c. 1850, Saint James' Hall, 1869).

In 2005, the well-known director Katie Mitchell staged *Jephtha* in cooperation with the English and Welsh National Operas. Mitchell set the scene at the end of World War II. In her scenario, the Allies know that bloody battles remain before they win the war. Jephtha's battle against the Ammonites is portrayed as a battle against the Axis powers. Jephtha is indeed victorious, but still must sacrifice his daughter according to his vow. The staging, while modern, follows the oratorio to the letter. In fact, with one exception, the characters' entrances and exits correspond to the original stage directions. The one exception is Ms. Mitchell's treatment of the *Deus ex machina* angel. Handel and Morell place this figure only in the third act, while Mitchell's solution attempts to integrate the angel within the oratorio's singular plot from the start.

I viewed the Mitchell production of *Jephtha* at the English National Opera in London in July, 2005. It is ironic that while Handel retained the historical *Jephtha* setting from Judges even as he changed its fundamental meaning, Mitchell transforms the setting of Handel's oratorio to the modern era but leaves unchanged the traditional Handel and Morell Anglican interpretation. The fidelity to *Jephtha*'s themes of courage, the conflict between duty and love, and the connection between God and country make Mitchell's update remarkably effective in a twentieth-century world that appears to be falling apart.

Mitchell's staging certainly encountered the same dramatic challenges that Handel and Morell faced. The presence of the angel from the beginning of the oratorio,

for example, created an initially confusing effect. The audience wondered who she was and what she was doing onstage. Her costume included a pair of cliché angel wings that drew considerable attention to her and made the third act less surprising. The concept of an ordained death sacrifice to please God remained jarring within the context of World War II, but more so since it was seen through the lens of a twenty-first century audience wary of recent and potential terrorist conflicts.

However, after further reflection, it was this very juxtaposition of conflicts from different eras, suffused with Mitchell's fidelity to Handel's innovative view of Iphis as heroine, that created a unique meditation on the actions of humanity in the modern world. In Mitchell's adaptation, the Allied commander who knows the stark reality of sacrifice in battle and who concludes all too eagerly that the blood of one more civilian might end the nightmare of many must learn that only the incandescent courage of the innocent who accepts her fate will bring the battle to a close. The presence of German soldiers as adversaries also made the story immediate and visceral for a British audience that in 2005 would still have included people who could recall German bombers above their homes. The bombing of the King's Cross subway station in London two weeks after the performance only reinforced the immediacy of Handel and Morell's treatment of war and sacrifice. Far from simply updating *Jephtha*, Mitchell used the eighteenth-century values of Handel and Morell to illuminate current political and moral questions. In so doing she also revealed that, at its core, Handel's *Jephtha* still conveys human concerns in such a way to make it a viable work for modern performance.

### 1.3 Historical Perceptions of *Jephtha* and Potential Insights for a New Dramatic Analysis

The history of scholarship on *Jephtha* is dominated by the view that the oratorio's last-minute rescue of Iphis by an angel causes irreparable dramatic harm by devaluing the meaning of the sacrifice required by God. Handel scholar Winton Dean, in his seminal book *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques*, concludes that the unmerited sufferings of Iphis are a cardinal feature of the story. He believes that Handel and Morell muddle a powerful account by including a *Deus ex machina* that weakens the credibility of an otherwise omnipotent and ever-present God of the Old Testament. Dean concludes that the music and text following the saving of Iphis are weak and uninspired.<sup>18</sup> He describes the *Deus ex machina* as "...coming near to wrecking the oratorio."<sup>19</sup> Dean, in his critique of the third act, states:

"...Morell no doubt felt obliged to equate the tribal Jehovah of the Book of Judges with the Christian God of the New Testament, and therefore to eliminate the human sacrifice; but his attempt to render the story palatable to Christian ears falsified it by either standard. He does not make it clear in Act I whether Jephtha's agitation before the vow is provoked by the spirit of God or not; in Act III he answers the question in the affirmative- the Angel speaks of the vow as 'dictated' by the Holy Spirit – and devoutly fathers the entire responsibility for the consequences on God."<sup>20</sup>

Dean's analysis, conducted more than two centuries after the debut of *Jephtha*, relies upon a series of assumptions. He assumes that Jephtha's vow to God reflects the will of the Almighty and that the deity has an ultimate design through the bloody covenant similar to the one manifested in other biblical sacrifice stories such as Abraham

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<sup>18</sup> Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 592.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 593.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 592.

and Isaac. Dean also assumes that Jephtha, "...being overwhelmed by a divine presence before making his vow" enjoyed God's favor before the agreement. If God favored Jephtha, then this favor legitimizes the bargain that may cost Iphis her life. If the agreement is legitimate, then Iphis' suffering represents a divine sanction as part of what the dark Act II choruses refer to as the "divine bargain." Dean is right to be concerned over the angel's acknowledgment of the Holy Spirit, an idea borrowed from the New Testament, but the critic notably does not acknowledge the possibility that Jephtha's vow, though well-intentioned, is imperfect - Jephtha, like Abraham, cannot understand God's full purpose until the deity intervenes.

If we accept Dean's assumptions, the *Deus ex machina* solution indeed makes no sense. The rescue not only disrupts the linear plot of the work, but also brings a pedestrian dramatic artifice to bear on a tragedy that appears to have been ordained by God. Dean states, "In Judges the vow is a business transaction between Jephtha and Jehovah. Jephtha has no 'visions of joy' or 'strange ardor:' he offers to do something for God if Jehovah will do something for him."<sup>21</sup> The unnamed daughter courageously accepts her fate and, according to Dean, is burned on the altar of sacrifice. There is no angel in the biblical narrative. Dean believes that the biblical narrative illustrates Jephtha's arrogance and the daughter's tragic fate.

But what if the dramatic intent of Handel's *Jephtha* is not the volubility of God's will, but the distorted perceptions of humans who try to discern the will of God? The appearance of the angel in this case would look less like a theatrical trick and more like a critical device for completing the heroic journey of the character Iphis. Handel and

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<sup>21</sup> Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 592.

Morell do more than tweak the biblical story – they build an entire narrative structure that must be evaluated on its own merits. The composer and librettist not only develop numerous characters who are absent from the Judges narrative, they imbue those characters with authentic emotions that wrap the otherwise formulaic story of Jephtha and his family into compelling and stark human tragedy.

Jephtha's unnamed daughter in the biblical narrative accepts her fate, but only because she must carry out her father's bidding. There is no playing out of the tragedy between father and daughter. Handel and Morell, by contrast, personify the daughter and give her a name that carried connotations of strength and even masculinity from the works of Ovid. Her recitatives and arias reveal a human being with independent thoughts and will.

Handel and Morell also create the character who becomes the fulcrum point of the oratorio, Jephtha's wife Storgè. Her character reflects both a mother's love and the anxiety over a bloody sacrifice. Handel and Morell use Storgè throughout the work as a kind of oracle or interpreter of God's will and Jephtha's confusion. Her insights make clear Jephtha's wrongheaded actions, which lay the groundwork for the heroic ascendance of Iphis and the concurrent fall of the character for whom the work is named.

## Chapter 2.

### 2.1 The Concepts of Dramaturgy and Agency with a view to *Jephtha*

In view of the dramatic enigma posed by *Jephtha*, and in order to dislodge its dramatic strengths towards a compelling performance, a conductor may well examine the concepts of dramaturgy and agency. Dramaturgy is a sociological concept, espoused by Erving Goffman, suggesting that human actions are dependent upon time, place, and audience - much like a movie or play.<sup>22</sup> Dramaturgical theory suggests that a person's identity is not a stable and independent psychological entity. A person constantly remakes his or her identity while interacting with other human beings.<sup>23</sup> The theory relies upon six motivic principles:

1. A person must believe in his/her "role."
2. The person may reveal his/her genuine thoughts to an audience. Or s/he may place those thoughts behind a metaphorical "mask."
3. The person must plan a dramatic realization (related to his/her "role").
4. S/he must create an ideal outcome for him/herself. This step is applicable to both protagonistic and antagonistic "roles."
5. S/he must maintain expressive controls.
6. S/he has the potential to "mask" his/her intentions through misrepresentation or outright deception.

Dramaturgical "character actors" employ these motivic principles within a theater-like framework. The Action implies what was done, the Scene implies when or where it was

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<sup>22</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



done, the Agent implies who did it, the Agency implies the manner through which s/he did it, and the Purpose implies why s/he did it.

These categories give the dramatist, and by extension the conductor, the essential tools to analyze everything from biblical narrative and Greek tragedy to French classical theater and the dramatic structure of an oratorio. The following sentence illustrates a series of motives that are possible within a larger dramaturgical structure:

“A hero (agent), with the help of a friend (co-agent), outwits the villain (counter-agent) by using a file (agency) that enables him to break his bonds (act) in order to escape (purpose) from the room where he has been confined (scene).”<sup>24</sup>

This sentence illustrates a pre-planned performance. The hero and his friend plot in advance to outwit the villain. There is a perception of the past that the audience implies to be true, even though the past is inexplicit and unexplained. The audience, therefore, can participate in a process called “entering a situation.” When one enters a particular situation or context, one wants to discover the facts of that situation. The audience, when not privy to the facts, makes certain predictions based upon tangible external cues. The audience treats the impressions of others as promises that are supposed to be reflective of the facts.

It is also important to note the situational dynamics between individual characters. According to Goffman, there are two options for others within the situation. They may offer valid impressions or invalid, “phony” impressions. One can define “phony” as either false information or unknown information. These “phony” impressions

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<sup>24</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 68.

promulgate basic dramaturgy, where individuals become performers and observers become the audience.<sup>25</sup>

The unpredictable situations within a drama require well-developed characters. Dramaturgical proponents make a distinction between characters and personas. Personas are truthful, unbiased qualities or events that exist within the dramatic action and frame it, but do not define it. In Handel's *Jephtha*, the main character makes a vow to God to secure success on the battlefield. This vow constitutes a pivotal point in the oratorio's action, but it is not the dramatic action itself. An effective drama cannot rely entirely on such fixed frames or personas. Unbiased qualities are far less believable than the changing partialities inherent in all human beings. Well-defined personas alone do not properly communicate people's individualisms. In addition, personas do not help an audience understand the competing purposes within a drama. The personas in *Jephtha* can take the form of mundane and indisputable facts - Jephtha strikes a bargain with God; Storgè is Jephtha's wife. By contrast, Jephtha's insecurity in making the vow and Storgè's violent reaction to the vow go beyond mere facts and instead reveal the internal tensions that generate the oratorio's drama. The background of the vow, therefore, and the characters' subsequent reaction to it, create the real drama.

Motives, situations, impressions, personas, and characters culminate in the portrayal of these characters in performance, which may take place on two extremes of a spectrum. First, the character may be written to convince the audience that his performance is sincere. Or, the character may be written to delude the audience, even if not always for personal gain or evil intent. The integrity of a character throughout a play

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<sup>25</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 54.

provides a series of comfortable impressions, while delusions shatter these established impressions. One extreme often requires the other – a character cannot shock an audience without grounded expectations.

The audience may not be reduced to a singular view any more than the onstage characters. The audience is not a monolithic entity but rather a group of observers possessing individual character qualities. These qualities depend upon background, socioeconomics, education, social constructs, and mood. The audience is a collection of characters whose diverse views lend richness to the perception of the oratorio performance. Those diverse perceptions may preclude us from offering a “definitive” dramatic analysis or ultimately, a definitive interpretation of *Jephtha* or any other work, but it is nevertheless important to analyze the drama so that we may understand the situations, characters, and dramatic intent against which audiences will view the work and define a persuasive performance.

What does dramaturgical analysis tell us about *Jephtha*? The approach yields a roadmap to an interpretation of the oratorio far different from Dean’s view of a flawed attempt to rationalize a cruel God. The critical clue comes in the form of Storgè, the keystone agent who illustrates her husband’s folly and glorifies her daughter Iphis. Storgè allows us to see how Iphis’ elevation, in tandem with the action of the angel, reveals the merciful, loving God that Handel and Morell use to sidestep the eighteenth-century political and religious conflicts inherent in telling an unadulterated Judges story.

## 2.2 Agencies and Dramatic Worldviews Illuminating Handel's *Jephtha*

### GREEK DRAMATIC MODELS

It is not surprising that Handel and Morell would turn to Greek drama as a model for the narrative structure of *Jephtha*. From 600 to 350 BCE, Greek tragedies relayed stories that taught religious and ethical lessons similar in intent to the Christian parables.<sup>26</sup> The Greeks were also master dramatists who provided Handel and Morell with a prism to transform the monochromatic Judges story into a colorful and viscerally moving oratorio.

Eighteenth-century artists frequently modeled their works on those of ancient Greece and Rome. Handel embraced ancient philosophies as a young composer in Protestant *Sachsen-Anhalt*. He was also steeped in the Lutheran fascination with preaching and oratory. Like many educated Protestants, Handel knew the Quintilian oration and rhetorical models. Some Lutheran town councils even required *Kapellmeisters* to teach classical rhetoric alongside music.<sup>27</sup>

Though neither Handel nor Morell left any explicit references to their literary antecedents, ostensible similarities imply that they may have modeled *Jephtha* upon Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Written in about 408 BCE, *Iphigenia in Aulis* is Euripides' final play. According to legend, Euripides died before the play's first performance and the work was subsequently produced by his son, Euripides the Younger.<sup>28</sup> The plot is similar to that of *Jephtha*. Agamemnon is the leader of the Greek military coalition

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<sup>26</sup> Euripides, *The Complete Euripides*, ed. Peter Burian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xiv-xv.

<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Bartel, *Musica Poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 71.

<sup>28</sup> Euripides, *The Complete Euripides*, ed. Peter Burian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 277-78.

during the Trojan War. He agrees to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to appease the goddess Artemis and secure victory over Troy. He reluctantly asks his wife Clytemnestra to send Iphigenia to the naval convoy in Aulis. Iphigenia believes that she is going to Aulis to marry the great warrior Achilles. Agamemnon subsequently has doubts about his vow and sends a second message to his wife, instructing her to ignore his initial request. Agamemnon's brother Menelaus intercepts the message and initiates a discussion with Agamemnon about the benefits of the proposed sacrifice of Iphigenia. After a heated debate, Agamemnon decides to carry out the sacrifice. When Clytemnestra discovers her husband's intent, she and Achilles vow to defend Iphigenia. The Greek army, meanwhile, believes that the sacrifice is necessary and threatens to stone Achilles. Iphigenia, realizing the hopelessness of her situation, convinces Achilles that her death is inevitable. At the moment Iphigenia is to be sacrificed, the goddess Artemis leads her away from the altar and sacrifices a deer in her place.<sup>29</sup>

Morell embeds *Jephtha* with unmistakable parallels to *Iphigenia in Aulis*. He calls Jephtha's daughter Iphis, a name that shares its etymological root with Iphigenia, which means "strong born" in Greek. Jephtha, like Agamemnon, is a warrior insecure about the potential outcome of an impending battle. Both men feel obligated to offer their daughters as sacrifice to a deity. Their wives attempt to convince them not to carry out their sacrifices. Both Iphis and Iphigenia are willing to lay down their lives for their gods, families, and nations. *Deus ex machinae* figures rescue both Iphis and Iphigenia from death; and both women emerge from the threat of sacrifice by taking on the state of

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<sup>29</sup> Euripides, *The Complete Euripides*, ed. Peter Burian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 297-368.

chastity - Iphigenia as a priestess of the virgin Artemis and Iphis in the protection of the angel of God.

There are also interesting parallels between Hamor, Iphis' betrothed, and Achilles, who intends to marry Iphigenia. Both are warriors in love with prominent women. Each is horrified to learn that his commander has agreed to sacrifice his daughter for the good of the nation. Both Hamor and Achilles vow to protect their fiancées from harm. Both relent when Iphis and Iphigenia accept their fates. Their acceptance of the sacrifice is telling for several reasons. First, each man places what he believes to be the will of God over the life of his fiancée. Second, the men personify dedication to military service above all else as they cede the course of their own histories to Agamemnon and Jephtha, who occupy the problematic dual roles of military leaders and fathers of their soon-to-be-sacrificed intended.

The real significance of Hamor and Achilles' acquiescence, however, is that it signals an impending shift of the mantle of hero from warriors to victims. The two soldiers whose brawn and courage create storybook victories on the battlefield are left strangely disarmed in the face of Iphis and Iphigenia and their willingness to lay down their lives to redeem their fathers' pledges.

It is a pattern that will continue throughout both *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Jephtha*. Jephtha will find himself similarly disarmed by the daughter who willingly embraces the courage and rationality that her father ignores. She accepts her fate both out of loyalty to her people and out of love for her father. She is the only family member who does not chastise his decisions. She emerges as the conscience of the oratorio while Jephtha slowly fades into narrative oblivion. Jephtha's downfall may be far gentler than that of

Agamemnon, whom the Greek dramatists ultimately consign to violent death at the hands of Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus; but Handel and Morell create the dramatic action of the oratorio by contrasting Jephtha going to God to secure his own preservation with the humility of Iphis that ultimately convinces God to preserve her existence.

## FRENCH CLASSICAL THEATER MODELS

*Jephtha* also shares characteristics with French classical theater. Handel looked often to France for dramatic and narrative inspiration. His early oratorio *Athalia* is an adaptation of Jean Racine's biblical drama *Athalie*. Racine's plays are the epitome of a French classical style that often adapts Greek and Hebrew dramas. The plots, much like Greek classical theater, are linear in that subplots may exist, but the audience does not bear direct witness to them.<sup>30</sup> Many of Racine's plays also contain five acts, a structure similar to that of the Greeks. All of these distinguishing characteristics coalesce in his 1674 tragedy, *Iphigénie*.

*Iphigénie*, as the title implies, is an adaptation of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. *Iphigénie* was first performed at the Versailles Orangerie during the reign of Louis XIV.<sup>31</sup> Racine likely wrote the work in honor of the king's recent conquest of the Franche-Comté region. The play, cast in heroic Alexandrine verse (iambic hexameter), closely follows Euripides' narrative,<sup>32</sup> though Racine injects his own dramatic perspective through contrasting character developments and his treatment of the *Deus ex machina*.

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<sup>30</sup> Jean Racine, *The Complete Plays of Jean Racine*, trans. Samuel Solomon (New York: Random House, 1967), 152-53.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-53.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

Racine's drama, like Euripides', takes place at Aulis harbor. Maintaining the unity of time and place, there are neither timeline nor location changes. Agamemnon can strike an effective blow against the Trojans only if he sacrifices his daughter Iphigénie to the goddess Diana, the Romanized Artemis. Agamemnon knows that his wife Clytemnestre would never approve such an offering. He consequently asks Clytemnestre to bring Iphigénie to Aulis under the pretext of allowing her to marry the great warrior Achille. Agamemnon develops doubts over his duplicitous plan and subsequently sends Arcas, a page, to discourage Clytemnestre and Iphigénie from coming to Aulis. The message never reaches the two women, and Eriphile of Lesbos, a young woman in Clytemnestre's care and an ally of Troy, heralds their harborside arrival.

Eriphile, who does not exist in the Euripides drama, laments to her confidante Doris (also from Lesbos) that she harbors an irrational passion for Achille and will do anything to separate Iphigénie from him. Eriphile promises to commit suicide if unsuccessful. In the meantime, Iphigénie, upset over her father's standoffish behavior, expresses her concerns to Eriphile.

Clytemnestre finally receives Arcas' message warning her not to bring Iphigénie to Aulis and flies into a rage. She believes the reason for the message is that Achille no longer wishes to marry Iphigénie. Eriphile, delighted by this unexpected turn of events, attempts to use the family's vulnerable position to her advantage. An utterly befuddled Achille is heartbroken over Arcas' elusive message. Clytemnestre then orders Iphigénie to leave Aulis.

The third act opens with an emboldened Achille convincing Clytemnestre and Iphigénie that his intentions to marry are true. Agamemnon promises Eriphile her



freedom pending the wedding ceremony. He then encourages his daughter, who does not know her fate, to proceed to the sacrificial altar. Clytemnestre agrees not to accompany her husband and daughter to the mountaintop. Arcas bursts in and reveals Agamemnon's true intentions to Clytemnestre, who reacts with sadness and anger. She leaves Aulis to petition the king for her daughter's clemency, to no avail. Achilles, enraged over his use as a pawn in Agamemnon's scheme, vows to protect his fiancée at all costs. Iphigénie defends her father's actions, explaining that her planned sacrifice is for the nation's welfare.

Achilles's passionate reaction upsets Eriphile as she sees how much he loves Iphigénie. Eriphile vows to sow more discord so that she may win Achilles's affections. Agamemnon is initially uncompromising in his duty to the gods, but is nevertheless upset by his family's reaction to the upcoming murder. Clytemnestre berates her husband for his dishonesty. Achilles informs his future father-in-law that he will save Iphigénie at all costs. Agamemnon reminds him of his military and spiritual obligations. Achilles then declares that Iphigénie means more to him than the Greek military cause. Agamemnon, annoyed by his warrior's rantings, changes his mind and promises to spare Iphigénie's life on the condition that she and Achilles never marry. Iphigénie, filled with despair, agrees to return with her mother to Aulis.

Iphigénie consents to sacrifice her life in the fifth act's opening scene. She is forbidden by her father to speak to Achilles and feels that death is her only option. She leaves her family and approaches the sacrificial altar. Clytemnestre is inconsolable, while Achilles reluctantly accepts the situation. Iphigénie meets her father - offstage - on the road to the mountaintop. They are both surprised to meet Ulysse, who explains that the

contemptuous Eriphile's given name in Lesbos was Iphigénie, and that she is the one to be sacrificed. Eriphile mounts the altar and commits suicide, placating the gods' desires. As a result, Iphigénie (Agamemnon's daughter) realizes that she is not to be killed. Clytemnestre discovers the joyous news and rejoins her reconciled family at Aulis. Agamemnon, realizing his errors, permits his daughter and Achille to marry.<sup>33</sup>

Racine makes subtle developments to the Euripides drama, but none more important than the addition of Eriphile. She is Racine's *Deus ex machina*, the fulfillment of Diana's wishes. Eriphile is not the saving deity of Euripides' Artemis or an angel sent from another world as in Handel and Morell's *Jephtha*, but rather an integral part of the Racine drama. Her jealousy of Iphigénie as a result of her attraction to Achille exacerbates the conflict between Agamemnon and his family. The dramatic tension grows when the audience realizes that Eriphile may seduce Achille, thereby keeping Iphigénie away from him. The plot has the potential to devolve into an emotional, spiritual, and diplomatic disaster, but Racine does not enable a villain's victory. He instead employs Eriphile as sacrificial object. Eriphile moves from part of the linear plot to an actor outside of it. Diana's desire for Eriphile's sacrifice is the point where temporal and spiritual worlds meet.

Handel took from both Euripides and Racine the dramatic infrastructure for showing the complex nature and consequences of human interactions with God. The composer and his librettist Morell not only adopted the Greek and French linear plot and staging devices, they also adopted the practice of creating vivid characters who show the human toll of sacrificial demands by deities. Handel does not employ every element of

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<sup>33</sup> Jean Racine, *The Complete Plays of Jean Racine*, trans. Samuel Solomon (New York: Random House, 1967), 161-230.

the French theater – he leaves behind Eriphile and her complications in favor of a simpler narrative in three acts – but he learns from Racine that the way to navigate the sometimes curious behavior of gods is to concentrate on the actions of people.

## Chapter 3.

### 3.1 Jephtha's Vow: An Invalid Utterance By an Insecure Warrior

Any new analysis of Handel's *Jephtha* must turn on the question of whether the title character's agreement with the Hebrew God is both mutually acknowledged and reflective of the will of the deity. Winton Dean bases his entire analysis of the oratorio on the theory that God accepts and acknowledges the terrible consequences of the agreement with Jephtha. Dean's view leads him to dismiss the credibility of the angel and the artistic legitimacy of Handel's sudden shift in musical style after the attempted sacrifice.

But nowhere in *Jephtha*'s libretto does God respond to the title character. Nowhere do Handel and Morell indicate that God accepts the sacrificial vow proposed by Jephtha; and nowhere does anyone other than Jephtha understand - except through Jephtha - that the vow requires him to kill the first thing he sees upon his return from battle with the Ammonites. More broadly, if God favors the Israelites as the so-called "chosen people," why does Jephtha need to make a bargain with God at all? The theological inconsistency suggests that Jephtha may in fact be interfering with God's will instead of invoking it.

Ambiguity surrounding the agreements at the heart of sacrificial dramas plays a key role in both Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* and Racine's *Iphigénie*. Agamemnon, the initial hero of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, makes his agreement with the god Artemis before the play begins. It is unclear how Agamemnon made the agreement and how Artemis reacted to it. Greek audiences were probably familiar with the legend of Agamemnon's

agreement, but modern audiences cannot even be sure if it was a formal agreement at all. It is entirely possible that Artemis, before the play, appeared to Agamemnon and demanded that he sacrifice Iphigenia; or Agamemnon may have initiated the vow fearing for his prospects in the Trojan War. The sacrificial agreement employs a dramaturgical “mask” motive and makes it difficult to label particular agencies. We may assume only that Agamemnon plans to sacrifice his daughter for the sake of the nation.

The audience is left to wait until the play’s final moments to discern the intentions of Artemis. Iphigenia’s poise in the midst of temporal and spiritual challenges is rewarded by her ascension to the throne of Artemis, who subsequently encourages the people to sacrifice a deer instead. Artemis thus lends an air of legitimacy to the sacrifice, while rewarding Iphigenia’s behavior. From a dramaturgical perspective, the actions of the goddess end up serving as agency to glorify Iphigenia.

Racine, like his ancient predecessor, begins his play with the agreement already in place. It is again difficult to pinpoint the circumstances surrounding the sacrifice. The only agent of which we are aware is Diana’s sacrificial demand. The play’s concluding agencies are unfortunately ambiguous compared to those of Euripides. Whereas in the Greek play, Artemis takes Iphigenia to the mountaintop, there is no evidence that Racine’s Iphigénie encounters Diana (the Romanized name of Artemis). Eriphile sacrifices herself in lieu of Iphigénie for reasons unclear to the audience. We learn that Diana wanted Eriphile as a sacrifice all along, but how did Eriphile discover this detail? Ulysse informs Agamemnon and his daughter that Eriphile stabbed herself on the altar, but we know little about the reliability of Ulysse since he is not a main character in the drama.

Handel and Morell, unlike Euripides and Racine, allow the audience to witness Jephtha's vow with God. The music and text of the first act immediately establish doubt about whether that vow legitimately reflects the will of God. Handel illustrates the ambiguous relationship between God and Jephtha with an unusual grouping of recitatives. The opening *recitativo semplice* expresses the main character's insecurities and arrogance. The subsequent *accompagnato* outlines the vow, and the final *semplice* recitative seals the vow in the presence of the Israelites. Handel does not set three successive recitatives in any other part of the oratorio. It's a signal that something significant occurs here. The difficult task is deciphering just what it is and how it reflects on both God and Jephtha.

At first glance, it appears as if the composer and the librettist are lending credence to the vow by emphasizing its importance. The entrance of the Israelites seems to constitute a clear sign of the gravity and significance of the action taken by Jephtha. The Israelites respond to Jephtha's solemn promise through the chorus "O God, behold our sore distress, omnipotent to plague or bless..." The response seems to affirm Jephtha's prayers and the confidence of the Israelites in his military leadership.

Grave

O Gott, sieh un - sre gro - Be Not, Straf'  
 O God, be - hold our sore dis - tress, om -

O Gott, sieh un - sre gro - Be Not, Straf'  
 O God, be - hold our sore dis - tress, om -

O Gott, sieh un - sre gro - Be Not, Straf'  
 O God, be - hold our sore dis - tress, om -

O Gott, sieh un - sre gro - Be Not, Straf'  
 O God, be - hold our sore dis - tress, om -

Str., Ob.  
 Grave  
 Ob. I/II, VI/1 II  
 Va., Cont.  
 [f]

o - der Lohn ist dein Ge - bot!  
 - ni - po - tent to plague, or bless!

o - der Lohn ist dein Ge - bot!  
 - ni - po - tent to plague, or bless!

o - der Lohn ist dein Ge - bot!  
 - ni - po - tent to plague, or bless!

o - der Lohn ist dein Ge - bot!  
 - ni - po - tent to plague, or bless!

Example 3.1: Act I, Scene IV: 18. Chorus, "O God, Behold Our Sore Distress," mm. 1–8.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 85.

A closer look suggests that the importance of the vow may lie more with the manner in which Jephtha approaches it than its potential implications for the deity. Handel and Morell's opening *semplice* recitative sets the stage as Jephtha prefaces his vow with a disjunct, almost schizophrenic monologue, describing his "fancies of the brain" and "strange ardour firing his breast." These phrases are not suggestive of a brave warrior but are the ramblings of a frightened man. The corresponding music is unusually chromatic. Handel begins the recitative in B-flat major, which is the subdominant key of the preceding aria. The predominance of B-flats in the opening chords signals a modulation to what the listener expects will be a G minor conclusion, but what instead cadences on a G major chord. Handel then uses the G major chord as a pivot to the key areas of C minor, E-flat major, A-flat major, and back to E-flat major. Handel sets up the dominant chord that naturally leads to E-flat major and instead "resolves" up a chromatic half step, setting up a dominant chord in the key of C major. In one way of illustrating Jephtha's tumultuous inner thoughts, the composer modulates from B-flat major to C major (two unrelated keys) in twelve measures. It is a musical language that underscores the fragile and somewhat confused outlook of the main character, much as Haydn used modulations and tonal ambiguity to suggest chaos during the opening of *The Creation*.



**JEPHTHA**

J. Was soll dies wir - re Spiel in mei - nem Geist ?  
What mean these doubt - ful fan - cles of the brain ?

Cont.

J. Bil - der des Glücks er - schei - nen hier vor mir,  
Vi - sions of joy rise in my rap - tur'd soul,

Example 3.2: Act I, Scene IV: 15. *Recitative*, “What Mean these Doubtful Fancies of the Brain,”  
mm. 1–4 (Jephtha).<sup>35</sup>

The musical and textual connotations change at the eighth note pickup to the eleventh bar, as Jephtha shifts from anxiety to confident prayer. He quiets himself and declares, “Be humble still, my soul, it is the spirit of God – in whose great name I offer up my vow.” Handel modulates from C major to A minor, relative keys in tonal harmony. The static harmonic language prepares the listener for the long-held chords in the following *accompagnato* recitative.

The *accompagnato* recitative delivers the contents of the vow itself. Jephtha states, “If, Lord, sustain’d by thy almighty power, Ammon I drive, and his consulting bands, from these our long uncultivated lands, and safe return a glorious conqueror; - what, or whoever shall first salute mine eyes, shall be forever thine, or fall a sacrifice.”

<sup>35</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 81.



Example 3.3: Act I, Scene IV: 16. *Accompagnato*, “If, Lord, Sustained by thy Almighty Power,” mm. 1–3 (Jephtha).<sup>36</sup>

The recitative’s static harmonic motion – compared to the earlier harmonic instability - frames a singular moment in the drama that will motivate Jephtha’s actions throughout the oratorio. Said another way, the recitative establishes Jephtha’s agreement with God as the main agency that will drive the oratorio’s linear plot. Jephtha seems to feel, in spite of his insecurity, that he finds favor with God. Jephtha invokes the name of God and asserts that the deity will listen to him and grant his requests.



Example 3.4: Act I, Scene IV: 17. *Recitative*, “’Tis said. Attend ye, Chiefs,” mm. 12–16 (Jephtha).<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 83.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.



Example 3.4, continued

Yet the same God who spoke directly to Abraham and Moses does not emerge from the heavens to acknowledge the pleas of Jephtha. Neither does a *Deus ex machina* figure appear. The audience is left with no clear indication that God will grant the Hebrews victory over their Ammonite oppressors. The biblical God of Israel had certainly delivered His people from Egypt, the Amorites and Philistines, but would he favor Jephtha, who became leader of the Hebrews only after being banished in the Judges account because he was “the son of a harlot?” The vow becomes even more uncertain in light of the fact that many Israelites had begun to worship Moloch, a false god revered by the Ammonites, so it was far from clear which deity would prevail.

The absence of a clear response from God leaves Jephtha to develop his vow in terms that leave plenty of room for interpretation. Jephtha requires a military victory for the good of the nation, but cannot initially decide upon what to offer the deity. He states, “what, or whoever shall first salute mine eyes, shall be forever thine, or fall a sacrifice.”<sup>38</sup> Jephtha does not elaborate on what he means by “shall be forever thine.” It is possible that he regards “forever thine” as an alternative to sacrifice, perhaps something like the dedicated life of virginity that eventually befalls Iphis. He may conversely equate the

<sup>38</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 83.

terms “forever thine” and “fall a sacrifice” and believe that the afterlife makes bloody sacrifice an appropriate offering to the God he expects will deliver him in battle. The potential object of sacrifice is just as murky. The phrase “what, or whoever shall first salute mine eyes” could refer to almost anything from animals or a fellow soldier to a family member. How will Jephtha encounter the sacrificial object? The term “salute mine eyes” may mean that he will be looking for something on his own. Or it could just as plausibly mean that he will notice the first anomaly *en route* from the battlefield. Handel and Morell thus take all of the ambiguities present in the Euripides and Racine narratives and double down with a character who, instead of responding to a dictate from the Almighty, seems to be making it up as he goes.

The Israelites, according to the stage directions in the score, enter as Jephtha is concluding his vow, on the downbeat of the third recitative. They hear him seal the vow and subsequently approve of his actions. From an external point of view, Jephtha is a great warrior, worthy of respect. Zebul claims that only Jephtha can lead the Israelite forces to victory. Jephtha, encouraged by the people’s support and still filled with confidence about his relationship with the Almighty, asks the Israelites to “invoke the holy name of Israel’s God.” And even though God again does not invoke Jephtha’s name in return, the Israelites accede to Jephtha’s bold request out of respect and loyalty to their commander.

Handel’s music, however, creates an undertow of uncertainty among the Israelites. The audience should expect a joyous response to Jephtha’s request - after all, Jephtha’s third recitative is succinct, confident, and harmonically conventional. But the Israelites’ part, encapsulated in the following chorus, suggests that they lack confidence.

The chorus begins with a *grave* introduction followed by a contrapuntal A section *a tempo ordinario*, in turn followed by a B section in a similar tempo. This tripartite form is typical of late Handel choruses, yet the singers, who represent the Israelites, do not seem remotely certain of the deity's favor. The *grave* section, in the somber key of D minor, contains the text "O God, behold our sore distress, omnipotent to plague or bless." The composer then sets the same text in a knotty, chromatic double fugue in the D minor A section. After the initial statement of the fugal expositions, Handel restates the motives of the opening exposition. The effect is rather static, reminiscent of the static textures present in the preceding *accompagnato* recitative.

**A tempo ordinario**

sieh un - sre gro -  
be - hold our sore

O Gott, sieh un - sre gro - Be  
O God, be - hold our sore dis-

**A tempo ordinario**

Example 3.5: Act I, Scene IV: 18. *Chorus*, "O God, Behold Our Sore Distress," mm. 9–10.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 85.

The composer then continues the A section with a permutation of the fugal exposition motives. However, he concludes each of these permutations with a descending diminished seventh interval. Throughout German Baroque music and beyond, the descending diminished seventh represents pain, death, and sorrow.<sup>40</sup> Handel curiously also concludes this tragic motive on “bless,” a word that in most circumstances carries positive connotations.

There is a small reprieve from the Israelites’ doubt and darkness in the B section. Handel sets a grouping of ebullient contrapuntal motives on the words “turn thy wrath, and bless once more, thy servants, who thy name adore.” The new, brighter F major tonality seems assured until the movement’s final four measures. Suddenly, the music modulates to G minor, which in turn leads to a harsh diminished seventh chord on the word “name.” It is unclear at this point why the composer sets God’s name on such a dissonant chord. Handel then sets the word “adore” on a cadential point from G minor to D major. One can interpret the chord as a picardy of D minor, the tonality of the opening *grave*.

The final beat of measure 89 contains an E-flat in both the chorus and the orchestra, which subsequently leads to a D major seventh chord in first inversion. This chord then resolves to a G minor chord. The listener attunes her or his ear to a new G minor tonal area. There is no clear sojourn back to the number’s opening D major, this in spite of the piece’s D major conclusion. Beginning in the latter part of measure 90, Handel moves from a series of G minor chords to a diminished seventh chord built on

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<sup>40</sup> George J. Buelow, “Rhetoric and Music,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, eds. Stanley Sadie and J. Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), xxi: 267.

C-sharp. This chord moves to a G minor second inversion chord, which subsequently resolves to the concluding D major chord.

However, the movement to the D major chord is thoroughly unconvincing. It sounds as if Handel ends the movement on a question.

The image shows a musical score for a chorus in Handel's *Jephtha*. It consists of five vocal staves and a keyboard accompaniment. The key signature is G minor (one flat). The lyrics are: "nah'n, die dir fle - hend nah'n. / name, who thy name a - dore." The music ends on a half cadence in G minor.

Example 3.6: Act I, Scene IV: 18. Chorus, "O God, Behold Our Sore Distress," mm. 90–93.<sup>41</sup>

It is a question he poses musically by treating the G minor to D major movement as a half cadence. Johann Mattheson, well-known for his treatises on figures and the *Affekts*, describes the half cadence as posing an *interrogatio*, or the musical equivalent of a question. He argues that composers often provide responses to the *interrogatio* moment in a movement immediately following the half cadence.<sup>42</sup> For example, in Johann Sebastian Bach's fourth Brandenburg Concerto, the second movement concludes with a Phrygian half cadence in B major. The third movement then begins in G major, a tonality

<sup>41</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 91.

<sup>42</sup> Dietrich Bartel, *Musica Poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 313.



very much related to the previous movement's final B major chord. Consequently, Bach answers the so-called “musical question” in an aurally satisfying manner.



**3. Presto**

*Violino principale* 10

*Flauto dolce I* 22

*Flauto dolce II* 22

*Violino I in ripieno* 10

*Violino II in ripieno* 4

*Viola in ripieno*

*Violoncello*

*Violone* 14

*Continuo*

Example 3.7: Johann Sebastian Bach, *Brandenburg Concerto no. 4*, BWV 1049.  
*Andante*, mm. 64–71, *Presto*, mm. 1–7.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Sechs Brandenburgische Konzerte*, ed. Heinrich Bessler, 5111 BA (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1969), 125–26.



Handel, unlike Bach, poses the question in the half cadence but does not answer it. Mattheson suggests that movements ending with an *interrogatio* half cadence are almost always slow.<sup>44</sup> The musical responses to these figures are in faster tempi. However, Handel concludes a faster choral movement with the half cadence and immediately follows with a *semplice* recitative. He begins the recitative with a C minor chord, a harmonic retrogression that leaves unresolved the uncertainty that concludes the Israelite chorus. These harmonic oddities disturb the listener and lead him/her to believe that, dramatically speaking, unfortunate events are to come.

Ending the chorus with an unanswered musical question reinforces the curious and one-sided interaction between God and Jephtha. The nature and motivations of God are no better understood after this chorus than at the beginning of Jephtha's series of recitatives. The audience, which expects assurance as it enters a straightforward situation, instead confronts the foreshadowing of change agents that uncomfortably conflict with the main character's master plan. The concluding D major chord creates an exclamation point next to the growing uncertainty about whether God really wants Jephtha to sacrifice the first person or thing he sees. For now, the uncertainty remains a hint. We will not fully understand the deity or the vow until the third act.

Handel and Morell contrast the subtext of uncertainty about Jephtha's actions with an introduction of God as one who would not tolerate the sort of sacrifice the main character envisions. The authors begin the oratorio with a reflection on the nature of God that distinguishes Him from the starkly different gods of their Greek and French dramatic models. It's a necessary bit of exposition as they struggle to equate the characteristics of a

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<sup>44</sup> Dietrich Bartel, *Musica Poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 313.

single deity to the polytheistic model embedded in the works of Euripides and Racine. Each god in the Hellenistic world of Euripides and Racine relates to mortal beings in diverse ways and possesses both positive and negative human characteristics. It is entirely possible for the Greek gods to require human sacrifice. The God of the Old Testament, as interpreted by eighteenth-century orthodox Anglicans, is One. God created the universe and is the source of all life and goodness. Any unfortunate event is either not of God or for the ultimate good of the people (even if the people themselves aren't aware of it). In this context, God cannot make mistakes, nor can He change His will for humanity.

The meditation on the nature of God that begins the oratorio is played out against the political and religious battle between the Israelites and the Ammonites. The narrative establishes that the Ammonites are the sworn enemies of Israel. The composer and librettist draw the stark enmity between the two peoples by contrasting the characteristics of each nation's deities. The audience hears about the evils of the Ammonite gods in Zebul's opening aria. He cries, "Pour forth no more unheeded prayers to Idols deaf and vain..." Zebul follows this pledge with the statement, "No more with vile unhallowed airs, the sacred rites profane." Make no mistake – this conflict is a holy war. Zebul articulates a justification for war that lends political, religious and dramatic legitimacy to the cause of the Israelites.

ZEBUL

Ruft län - ger nicht die  
Pour forth no more un -

Göt - zen an,  
- heed - ed pray'rs,

Example 3.8: Act I, Scene I: 3. *Aria*, “Pour Forth No More Unheeded Prayers,” mm. 10–15 (Zebul).<sup>45</sup>

Handel and Morell follow Zebul’s aria with the rousing tripartite chorus. The chorus represents the voice of the Israelites expressing their despair over the Ammonite occupation. They become excited about the prospect of temporal and spiritual liberation. They also reinforce Zebul’s perception of the Ammonite gods as false idols. The chorus opens with a buoyant cry in D major, saying, “No more to Ammon’s god and king.” The dotted sixteenth and thirty-second notes in the two violin lines suggest a parody of the enemy’s royal ruler. The chorus then turns its collective attack on Moloch, one of the Ammonite deities. They declare, “fierce Moloch, shall our cymbals ring.” No praising false idols with unhallowed airs for these Israelites.

<sup>45</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 97.

There is a sudden change in the harmonic language at this moment. The soprano line, on the text “fierce Moloch” consists of an A-natural and D-natural. The audience expects this to be a continuation of the opening D major tonality. However, the composer uses the D to tonicize an unusual move to G minor, again on the word “Moloch.” The following measure then consists of all four choral parts chromatically moving back to D major. In addition, the string players stop playing the dotted “royal” motive when the chorus mentions “Moloch.”

Handel employs similar compositional techniques in the chorus’ fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth measures. The dotted rhythms return on the downbeat of measure five. Not coincidentally, this is the same moment at which the chorus utters the text “No more to Ammon’s god and king.” The composer then includes more harmonic ambiguity on the second statement of “fierce Moloch.” In this segment, the chorus modulates from D major to E minor to A minor to G major, back to D major. Much like the first statement, the dotted rhythms suddenly cease on the words “fierce Moloch.” The resulting musical language is uneasy and gives an audience the impression that Moloch and his fellow deities are illegitimate.

**Andante**

Soprano  
Nicht mehr der Cym - beln Klang er - schallt,  
No more to Am - mon's god and king,

Alto  
Nicht mehr der Cym - beln Klang er - schallt,  
No more to Am - mon's god and king,

Tenore  
Nicht mehr der Cym - beln Klang er - schallt,  
No more to Am - mon's god and king,

Basso  
Nicht mehr der Cym - beln Klang er - schallt,  
No more to Am - mon's god and king,

**Andante**  
Ob., Str.  
Tr. Ob.  
VL I/II, Va [S]  
Cont.

o Mo - - - loch, dei - ner Schreck - ge - stalt,  
fierce Mo - - - loch, shall our cym - bals ring,

o Mo - loch, dei - ner Schreck - ge - stalt,  
fierce Mo - loch, shall our cym - bals ring,

o Mo - loch, dei - ner Schreck - ge - stalt,  
fierce Mo - loch, shall our cym - bals ring,

o Mo - loch, dei - ner Schreck - ge - stalt,  
fierce Mo - loch, shall our cym - bals ring,

Example 3.9: Act I, Scene I: 4. Chorus, "No More to Ammon's God and King," mm. 1-4.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 9.

The second part of the chorus includes a short ritornello in a fast 12/8 meter. The ritornello features a grouping of rhythmic string motives consisting of an eighth note followed by four sixteenth notes, which is in turn followed by three eighth notes. These rhythmic and metrical characteristics are reminiscent of the *gigue*, a common Baroque dance form. Not surprisingly, the composer uses the *gigue* to illustrate the Ammonites' questionable dances to their illegitimate gods. The chorus, in homophonic outbursts, cries: "in dismal dance around the furnace blue..." Handel uses the phrase to make two important points. First, the Israelites are forced to worship a false god. Second, the "furnace blue" evokes the image of a funeral pyre upon which the sacrifice of an animal or human would be consumed. The Israelites condemn the oppressor who employs "burnt offerings," unaware that their leader is about to invoke the identical offering to their own God who protects them from these "dismal dances." This situation, dramatically speaking, masks both Jephtha's intentions and the vow's authentic meaning. The audience, entering a situation, expects the Israelite armies to enter battle without incident.

Handel's choice of the *gigue* is not accidental. Scholars believe that the *gigue* likely originated in England and was associated with the satirical and tawdry.<sup>47</sup> Handel's familiarity with Italian opera prompted him to write the *Jephtha* choral movement in the style of a *giga*, the Italian variant of the English *gigue*. A *giga* shares rhythmic patterns with its English and French counterparts; however, the *giga*'s overall harmonic rhythm is slower.<sup>48</sup> It is also primarily homophonic in texture, unlike the dense counterpoint prevalent in the French-style *gigue* adopted by J.S. Bach and his contemporaries.

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<sup>47</sup> Meredith Ellis Little, "Gigue (i)," *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/11123> (accessed 21 June 2012).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Handel's use of the Italianate *gigue* therefore illustrates the negative connotations associated with the Ammonite religious practices.

The choral texture becomes increasingly chromatic when the opening statements reappear. However, the orchestral *gigue* rhythms remain ever present. The number's B section concludes with a truncated ritornello in the dominant key of A major. The composer then suddenly stops these musical ideas and begins anew in the D major tonic. The chorus enters with a fugue on the words "Chemosh no more will we adore with timbrelled anthems to Jehovah due." The fugal entrances are reminiscent of Baroque church music. This final section of the chorus is therefore a prayer. When they are freed from Ammonite tyranny, the Israelites will praise only the one true God. The movement ends triumphantly in D major with uplifting sentiments.

Andante

Ka - - mos, nicht dir lob-sin-gen wir im heil'gen Lie - de, das nur Gott ver -  
 Che - - mosh no more will we a-dore with timbrell'd an - thens to Je - ho - vah

Andante  
 Cont.

[mf]

Example 3.10: Act I, Scene I: 4. Chorus, "No More to Ammon's God and King," mm. 34-36.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 18.

The Hebrew God, unlike the Ammonite deities, does not approve of violent sacrifices. That revelation sets the stage for Jephtha's wife Storgè to put on her oracular robes and cast uncertainty on Jephtha and his determination to honor his vow with a God who cannot possibly want the warrior to draw the blood of his daughter.



## Chapter 4.

### 4.1 Storgè: Agent of God's Will

Jephtha's wife is the only character in the oratorio who fully understands the folly of her husband's deeds. Her relentless insights expose the flaws in his character and ultimately trace the intersecting arcs of Iphis as hero and Jephtha as anti-hero. From the beginning of the oratorio to the appearance of the *Deus ex machina*, virtually all of the characters who surround Jephtha trust the integrity and significance of his agreement with God. The degree to which Hamor and Zebul are upset by the fatal consequences of the vow shows that they take Jephtha at his word. Neither of them questions the vow's legitimacy, nor do they question Jephtha's judgment. Even the soon-to-be hero Iphis never questions whether her sacrificial death reflects the authentic will of God. Storgè stands alone as an agent of skepticism that God would endorse the death of her daughter.

The role of Clytemnestra provided Handel and Morell with a rich precedent for Storgè. Clytemnestra in both Euripides and Jean Racine is a strong woman who demands answers when events go awry. She rages against her husband upon discovering that her daughter is to be sacrificed. She demands to know why her husband would make such an agreement with the gods. The husband cannot give rational answers and instead becomes defensive and/or defiant.

Clytemnestra initially appears powerless because society does not give her the authority to change events. She must accede to her husband's commands. Her anger is justified, however, when Artemis/Diana saves Iphigenia at the last moment. The

unexpected rescue lends credence to the wife's position and shows that Clytemnestra has a better understanding of the gods than does her husband.

Storgè's central role in the oratorio is reflected by the fact that she has some of the most dramatic music in the work. In fact, the power of her music tips the conductor and the listener to seek special meaning in her texts. All of her music and text reflect an authentic and theologically sound view of the will of God. Taking her cue from Zebul's aria and the Israelite chorus, Storgè continually reinforces the view that violent sacrifice can never be a demand of the Almighty. Jephtha's vow, or at least his interpretation of it, cannot be authentic.

Storgè's first recitative and aria assert the moral legitimacy of the upcoming war. She begins with a *semplice* recitative in slow harmonic rhythm. It starts in E minor and ends in B minor (with a picardy third). However, this B major chord serves as the dominant chord of the subsequent E minor aria. The recitative thus truly begins and ends in the same key area. She says, "Twill be a painful separation, Jephtha, to see thee harnessed for the bloody field. But ah! How trivial are a wife's concerns, when a whole nation bleeds, and groveling lies, panting for liberty and life." The composer and librettist have two dramatic objectives. First, Storgè must portray herself as a selfless woman for the sake of the upcoming drama. Second, she cannot object to the sacrificial vow if she does not first provide approbation of the battle as a sign of her loyalty to her nation.

STORGE

S.

Mit Schmerzen wer-den wir uns tren-nen, Jeph-tha,  
Twill be a pain-ful se-pa-ra-tion, Jeph-tha,

Cont.

S.

wenn du ge-wapp-net ziehst ins blut'-ge Feld. Doch  
to see thee har-ness'd for the blood-y field. But

Example 4.1: Act I, Scene II: 7. *Recitative*, “Twill be a Painful Separation,” mm. 1–4 (Storgè).<sup>50</sup>

Her first aria reinforces the sad necessity of the coming war. The E minor *larghetto* sets up a melancholy air. The two-note phrases in the opening ritornello imply a mournful sighing. Storgè does not want her husband to fight the battle, but realizes that it is necessary for the liberation of Israel. The aria also reveals a profound love for Jephtha, a love that makes all the more poignant Storgè’s later fury at him over the agreement with God. She laments, “In gentle murmurs will I mourn, as mourns the mate forsaken dove.” Storgè is the character who loves Jephtha the most and chastises him the loudest for his actions. Love renders her indignation righteous. The aria sets the stage and establishes the credibility upon which Storgè will confront Jephtha.

<sup>50</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 41.

Storgè wishes her husband a successful battle and safe return. She states, “...and sighing wish thy dear return to liberty and lasting love.” She has confidence that Jephtha and the Israelites will win the victory over the Ammonites. Interestingly, she does not appeal to God for Jephtha’s safe deliverance. She realizes that the outcome of the battle is God’s will, regardless of what happens to her loved ones. She knows that war is necessary to rid the Israeli nation of false spiritual idols.



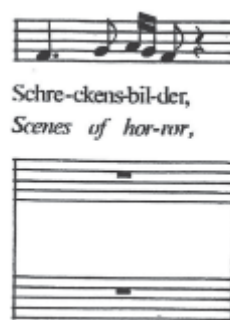
Example 4.2: Act I, Scene II: 8. *Aria*, “In Gentle Murmurs will I Mourn,” mm. 90–94 (Storgè).<sup>51</sup>

For most of the first act, the war looms in the distance, seemingly unrelated to the developments in Jephtha’s family. That distance suddenly dissolves when Storgè enters with her second recitative and aria. In the opening of Act I, Scene V, Storgè suddenly contradicts the platitudes of the earlier Israelite chorus that sealed Jephtha’s vow to the heavens. The *semplice* recitative opens in C minor, a key that is distant from the preceding chorus’ final D major chord. This is a harmonically tumultuous recitative. The composer modulates from C minor to F minor and B-flat minor, respectively. Storgè suspects that something terrible is afoot. This is not mere anxiety - she declares that “O, never was my foreboding mind disturbed before with such incessant pangs.” We do not

<sup>51</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten, HWV 70*, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 261.

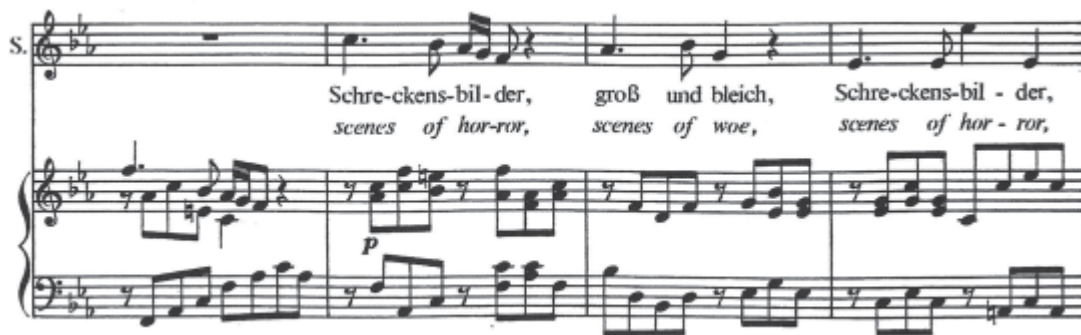
yet know the cause of these pangs, but we can draw a parallel between these feelings and Jephtha's "...doubtful fancies of the brain." The strange visions and emotions are likely related to one another and foreshadow the terrible consequences of Jephtha's vow.

The composer and librettist follow Storgè's recitative with one of the most exciting arias in the oratorio. The opening F minor ritornello introduces the listener to driving rhythms and short, biting melodic motives. Handel exaggerates this aria's seeming breathlessness through unusual harmonic progressions, including a series of Neapolitan sixth chords in measures eight and nine. The ritornello's *Epilog* then abruptly ends on the tonic F minor. The voice enters in the following measure with no orchestral accompaniment. This is certainly a shock to the listener - the preceding ritornello contains no homophonic rests and the basso continuo line often contains syncopated phrases. Consequently, the vocal entrance sounds as if all semblance of order disappears. The orchestra reenters in the following measure with a repeat of the vocal line's opening motive. Storgè's character repeats the words "Scenes of horror, scenes of woe" several times as she remains distraught over the terrible things to come.



Example 4.3: Act I, Scene V: 20. *Aria*, "Scenes of Horror, Scenes of Woe," mm. 13–17 (Storgè).<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 98.



Example 4.3, continued

The aria continues with the text “rising from the shades below” on an ascending eighth note line from B-flat below middle C to the C above middle C. The vocal line then suddenly descends from the C above middle C first to E-flat, then to D-flat. The composer also illustrates this character’s angst through the interplay of D-flats against D-naturals.



Example 4.4: Act I, Scene V: 20. *Aria*, “Scenes of Horror, Scenes of Woe,” mm. 19–20 (Storgè).<sup>53</sup>

The B section lends legitimacy to Storgè’s feelings. There is a dramatic shift in the music and text. The B section is in A-flat major, the relative major of the F minor

<sup>53</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 103.

tonic. The meter also changes from a rather conventional 4/4 to 3/8. The compound meter and orchestral rhythms suggest a dance. These rhythms are similar to those of the opening chorus' B section, when the Israelites' refer to the idolatrous dances around a blue furnace. These so-called "infernal dances" again foreshadow Jephtha's intended sacrifice and its parallels to the practices of pagan gods.

The aria's B section provides the first hints that it is Storgè, not Jephtha, who accurately understands the will of God. She declares that "While in never ceasing pain that attends the servile chain, joyless flow the hour of light." She realizes that her family will endure some sort of pain or suffering, though she perceives the reasons only darkly. The key phrase is "joyless flow the hour of light." Light, which usually carries a positive connotation, here brings the sadness of unwanted awareness.

Storgè refers to the "servile chain" as a metaphor for the Ammonite occupation. She reinforces her commitment to her nation's military cause, even in the midst of her "scenes of horror." The B section's 3/8 meter is similar to the compound meter in the opening chorus' B section, an echo that again connects the descriptions of Ammonite religious practices and Storgè's presentiments of the vow.

The oratorio's other characters do not understand or accept Storgè's visions. Iphis enters in the following *semplice* recitative, inquiring after her mother's distress. Storgè explains that her dreams "surprised her soul." Iphis dismisses them as mere dreams, saying, "Heed not these black illusions of the night, the mocking of unquiet slumbers, heed them not." Iphis ironically reinforces her assurances by referencing Jephtha: "My father, touched with a diviner fire, already seems to triumph in success, nor doubt I but

Jehovah hears our prayers.” Iphis, however, is at this point unaware of the vow and of her father’s insecurities.

It is also important to note that Iphis’ perception of her father in this passage trumps that of her mother. Iphis is convinced that Jephtha has a connection to God and that Storgè’s dreams are unimportant and unjustified. The exchange shows Iphis’ relative immaturity about spiritual matters. She has, to this point, been defined primarily by her fiancé Hamor and the narrative has not yet provided her with independent thoughts. Neither does she possess the insight to consider her mother’s passions. Not everyone is prepared to hear the hard truth from God.

We know that the Israelites either ignore Storgè or cast doubt on her visions because the composer does not follow her dramatic aria with a chorus. Generally, when any of the oratorio’s characters express critical statements, the composer follows their arias with a reflective chorus. The absence of such a chorus after Storgè’s aria is therefore unexpected. The lack of Israelite response might at first seem a dramatic weak point, but in fact it skillfully illustrates the fact that the Israelites accept Jephtha’s word over Storgè’s dark visions. The chorus responds when Jephtha seals his vow, but is silent after Storgè’s aria. Like Iphis, the nation, disquieted by the imminent war, cannot believe Storgè’s dark rendering of the future. It will take time and dramatic development in the oratorio for Storgè to gain the attention of the Israelites and to assume her role as the agent of Iphis’ heroism.

It is Storgè who responds first when Jephtha finally shares the news of his unfortunate covenant. Her initial aria in Act I, Scene II showed that her love for Jephtha enables her to speak to him in a forthcoming manner. Her second recitative and aria



provide insight into the terrible things that are to happen. These arias and recitatives lead to Storgè's response to Jephtha in a riveting *accompagnato* recitative that is one of the oratorio's most thrilling moments.

The *accompagnato* recitative shares several characteristics with an aria, but the composer does not follow her long recitative with an aria, a feature unique in this oratorio. The abruptness signals to the audience that her utterances represent a consequential comment on the narrative.

Storgè does not believe that the vow Jephtha made represents the will of the Almighty. Instead, she believes that God's goodness transcends unfortunate events on Earth. The recitative begins on an E minor chord. Storgè declares, "First perish thou; and perish all the world." She is angry and speaks in unusually blunt language for a woman addressing a male in the ancient world. Handel follows each opening phrase with a series of homophonic sixteenth notes in the strings. These string passages underscore Storgè's rage against both her husband and the vow.

Example 4.5: Act II, Scene III: 42. *Accompanato*, "First Perish Thou," mm. 1-7 (Storgè).<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 220.

S.  
dir!  
world!

Es gab der Him-mel die-ses ein-z'ge  
Hath Heav'n then bless'd us with this on-ly

*p*

S.  
Pfand der Lie-be uns, dies teu-re Kind, und nun  
pledge of all our love, this one dear child, for thee

*Concitato*  
*[f]*

Example 4.5, continued

The music becomes harmonically static when Storgè begins speaking of Iphis. She says, “Hath Heaven blessed us with this only pledge of all our love this one dear child...” The lack of harmonic and rhythmic motion illustrates Iphis’ pure state and innocent status within this enterprise. The sixteenth string passages return when Storgè continues: “...for thee to be her murderer?” It marks the first time that anyone in the oratorio uses the emotionally charged term “murderer.” Jephtha is far more circumspect in addressing the vow – he uses the euphemistic language “fall a sacrifice” when making his deal with God, and even as he discloses the vow to his family, he specifies that Iphis will die, but is afraid to mention that it is he who must kill her.

Storgè closes the first part of this dramatic *accompagnato* with a general condemnation of her husband: “No cruel man, let other creatures die.” She suggests that the husband who made the vow can also change it. The music and text chronicle Storgè’s withering rebuke of the legitimacy of her husband’s actions. The first cadential point of

the *accompagnato* recitative ends on the first utterance of “die.” Some may expect the recitative to end here, but the composer continues it for another 39 measures. This section of the recitative is more akin to an *arioso*, except for the fact that Handel continues to shift between the agitated sixteenth passages and harmonic and rhythmic stasis. Storgè’s rage against her husband alternates with dulcet tones in the static passages as she speaks of her daughter.

These musical and textual features continue until the pickup to measure 41, when Storgè again shifts from describing the world’s elements “...in one confusion lie” to musing on her daughter. But the composer does not change the musical language to reflect this textual shift. He instead continues the tumultuous eighth and sixteenth note string passages until the fermata on the word “good.” Storgè concludes the recitative on the words “...a father’s hand’s embrued.” The lack of change in the musical character of the recitative’s final bars shows that Storgè’s desperation has begun to outweigh her positive thoughts.

s.   
 -bre - chen und ver - der - ben, eh' ei - ner Toch - ter Blut, so  
 one con - fu - sion lie, ere in a daughter's blood, so

pp

Example 4.6: Act II, Scene III: 42. *Accompagnato*, “First Perish Thou,” mm. 41–44 (Storgè).<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 224.



Example 4.6, continued

It also underscores Iphis' innocence in the face of impending death. Storgè emphasizes Iphis' chastity as among her finest character traits. Handel and Morell introduce the concept to foreshadow God's true will, which will be made manifest through the *Deus ex machina* in the middle of Act III. The emphasis on chastity not only refers to Iphis' sexual state, but also suggests the strength and independence that the heroine will manifest later in the drama.

Storgè stands as a lone voice of truth in *Jephtha*. Her willingness to question Jephtha's bargain with the deity and her unwillingness to ascribe the vow to the will of God sets her in stark contrast to the shocked reactions of the oratorio's other characters.

Hamor begins his *semplice* recitative immediately after Storgè's stormy *accompagnato*. He states, "If such thy cruel purpose; lo! Your friend offers himself a willing sacrifice, to save the innocent and beauteous maid." Hamor offers to die in place of Iphis, but ultimately acknowledges that the vow contains a divine purpose. It is indeed laudable that Hamor is willing to sacrifice on behalf of his fiancée, but he lacks Storgè's singular determination to question the theological basis of the tragedy at hand.

Handel and Morell follow Hamor's aria with an interesting quartet scored for Storgè, Hamor, Jephtha, and Zebul. Storgè is notably the only woman in this quartet. Her

vocal color and character traits distinguish her from the men. She uses the quartet to ask Jephtha to relinquish the vow. Zebul and Hamor now join Storgè in her desperate pleas. These three characters enunciate identical texts. They all cry, “Recall the impious vow” at the quartet’s conclusion.

Jephtha refuses to accept the pleas of his wife, his brother and Hamor. He remains convinced that his vow makes manifest the will of God and must be executed. He declares, “Recorded stands my vow in Heaven above.” The three other characters then make a startling connection, one that Storgè foreshadowed in her two Act I arias – they connect Jephtha’s vow to the religious sacrifices of the Ammonites. The characters proclaim, “...And think not Heaven delights in Moloch’s horrid rites.”

S. Kind! Gott will das Op - -fer -  
 child! And think not Heav'n de -

H. Gott will das Op - -fer nicht, Gott will das Op - -fer  
 And think not Heav'n de - lights, and think not Heav'n de -

J. doch,  
 more,

Z. Gott will das Op - -fer nicht,  
 And think not Heav'n de - lights,

S. nicht, das Mo-lochs Die - -nern Pflicht,  
 -lights, in Mo-loch's hor - -rid rites,

H. nicht, das Mo-lochs Die - -nern Pflicht,  
 -lights, in Mo-loch's hor - -rid rites,

J. ach schweiget doch, fest steht der  
 I'll hear no more, her doom is

Z. das Mo-lochs Die - -nern Pflicht,  
 in Mo-loch's hor - -rid rites,

Example 4.7: Act II, Scene III: 45. *Quartet*, “O Spare your Daughter,” mm. 18–21 (Storgè, Hamor, Jephtha, Zebul).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 233.

It is by now a familiar theme for Storgè, who asserts that human sacrifice is characteristic of the Ammonite deities. If her husband carries out the murder of his daughter, he is no better than the Ammonites who offer grisly sacrifices to their gods. Confronted with the frightening parallel to Moloch, Jephtha says that he will “hear no more.” He maintains that Iphis’ doom is fixed and that nothing will stop him from carrying out the sacrifice. Jephtha has the final word in the quartet, affirming the promise to kill his daughter. His arrogance increasingly isolates him from the oratorio’s other characters.

Storgè’s status as a woman in the ancient world ironically makes her the character whose voice speaks most forcefully during the quartet against the injustice of her husband’s vow. Hamor and Zebul declaim the same texts in the quartet, but their words do not ring as true as hers. Zebul planned the battle against the Ammonites and Hamor fought. Jephtha made his vow as a result of Zebul’s plans. Hamor unquestioningly followed his superiors into war. Both Zebul and Hamor are, like it or not, connected to Jephtha’s vow.

Storgè endorsed the war, but could not fight the battle. She is unconnected to the vow and the battlefield cannot cloud her comparatively rational thoughts. She is aware of Jephtha’s folly well before the other characters. Handel illustrates Storgè’s dominance in the quartet through key musical motives. The groupings of sixteenth notes in measures 23 and 30 are similar rhythmically and harmonically to the corresponding passages in the opening measures of Storgè’s *accompagnato* recitative. The astute listener can hear the “First perish thou” motive when Storgè, Hamor, and Zebul say, “...recall the impious vow.” The sixteenth string passages and basso continuo lines in measure 24 of the quartet



are remarkably similar to the passages in measures 39 and 40 that occur on the words “in one confusion lie.” The composer and librettist bring this confusion to fruition with the juxtaposition between Storgè’s pleading and Jephtha’s arrogance. The passages hint that the God who did not sanction the vow may ultimately decide against exacting its full price.

It is at this point that Jephtha, for the first time, evinces some measure of angst in a largo *accompagnato* recitative that shows that he has heard and processed his wife’s words. He acknowledges at last that there may be a parallel between his sacrifice and the sacrifices of Chemosh and Moloch. He asks, “Yet have I not vowed? And can I think the great Jehovah sleeps, like Chemosh, and such fabled deities?” The passage is damning – Jephtha, if only for a moment, equates some characteristics of the Ammonite idols with those of the Hebrew God.

1. J. ist er zu schreck-lich. Doch hab' ich's nicht ge - lobt? und kann ich  
 it is too shock-ing. Yet have I not vow'd? and can I

[f] [fp]

Example 4.8: Act II, Scene IV: 49. *Accompagnato*, “Deeper and Deeper Still,” mm. 13–18 (Jephtha).<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 237.





Example 4.8, continued

But as quickly as his doubts arise, he rejects them. He declares, “Ah no; Heaven heard my thoughts, and wrote them down, it must be so.” Jephtha convinces himself that human sacrifice is required by God and Storgè’s opinions do not shake his resolve. The Israelites likewise reject Storgè’s attempts to make the impending sacrifice of Iphis a human drama, rather than a theological one. Handel and Morell illustrate the people’s belief in Jephtha’s vow in the final chorus of Act II, arguably the best chorus of the oratorio. The movement, scored for strings, oboes, and basso continuo, opens with a separated, dotted rhythmic motive in the dark key of C minor. The chorus then enters in a rhythmically static manner, declaring that the decrees of the Lord are dark. The chorus also states that these decrees are hidden from the sight of mortals. The phrase rings hollow because the central thread of the Old Testament is revelation, or the process of God making Himself known to the people of Israel. It is clear that the people share a sense of foreboding, but they remain convinced that God will be the author of any disaster to come. They refuse to consider that the vow may not be of God.

**Largo**

**Soprano**  
O  
How

**Alto**  
O Herr,  
How dark,

**Tenore**  
Wie dun-  
How dark,

**Basso**  
O Herr,  
How dark,

**Ob. I, II [mf]**  
**Va. Cont.**

**Piano**

Herr, wie dun - kel ist doch dein Be -  
dark, how dark, O Lord, are thy de -

Wie dun - kel ist doch dein Be -  
How dark, O Lord, are thy de -

O Herr, wie dun - kel ist doch dein Be -  
How dark, how dark, O Lord, are thy de -

Example 4.9: Act II, Scene IV: 50. *Chorus*, “How Dark, O Lord, are thy Decrees,” mm. 1–6.<sup>58</sup>

The second part of the chorus begins with a series of fugal entrances in F minor, the subdominant key of the original C minor. The knotty subject is a motivic reflection of

<sup>58</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 249.

the text “All our joys to sorrow turning, and our triumphs to mourning.” This collective group, once overjoyed by military victory, is now somber over the upcoming sacrifice of Iphis. The chorus continues in the third part with the words “No certain bliss, no sordid peace.” The composer sets this text in an increasingly mournful fashion: the soprano line enters with a B-flat, followed by G-natural, E-flat, D, C, B-natural, C, G, A-flat, A-natural, and B-flat. The motive’s first measure, with its ascending sixth, illustrates sadness and lament, while the twisting chromatic melody in the second measure illustrates uneasiness with no guarantee of peace.



Example 4.10: Act II, Scene IV: 50. *Chorus*, “How Dark, O Lord, are thy Decrees,” mm. 25–33.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup>Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 253.

Example 4.10, continued

The Israelites, after much pain and sadness, accept the sacrificial terms by the chorus' fourth and final part. It is at this point that Handel makes the critical text change from Morell's "What God ordains, is right"<sup>60</sup> to "whatever is, is right." Handel simultaneously paraphrases and repudiates the Deist Alexander Pope, who dismissed the story of Jephtha because he believed that God's will would not include barbarous sacrifices of human beings. By placing into the mouths of the Israelite chorus Pope's view that only logical and rational things justified the existence of God, Handel associates the philosopher with characters who clearly misunderstand the roles of God and Jephtha. Both Pope and the Israelites miss the point that Jephtha's decision to carry out his terrible agreement cannot be blamed upon God. The deity may be all-powerful, but human beings like Jephtha still possess free will that sometimes leads them to

<sup>60</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 261.

undertake destructive actions in the name of God. It is just such a destructive action that the Act II chorus endorses, despite Storgè's protestations.

im Glau - ben sprecht: ist recht.  
-bey, still o - bey, is right.

-ge - ben sprecht: ist recht.  
still o - bey, is right.

8 Glau - ben sprecht: was uns ge - schieht, ist recht.  
still o - bey, what - e - ver is, is right.

-ge - ben sprecht: was uns ge - schieht, ist recht.  
still o - bey, what - e - ver is is right.

Example 4.11: Act II, Scene IV: 50. Chorus, “How Dark, O Lord, are thy Decrees,”  
mm. 119–24.<sup>61</sup>

Handel therefore uses the oratorio to reject the Deist belief that the harsh God portrayed in Judges makes the story inconsistent with eighteenth-century religious sensibilities. The composer seems to argue that if God is merciful and patient in responding to the sometimes misguided path of human free will, then Jephtha's story deserves a reprieve from the Deists' evidential and rational editing shears.

Handel and Morell's repudiation of Pope's ideas is nothing new. The French philosopher Voltaire lampoons the concept in his novella *Candide*. In it, he argues that everything is not for the best in the “best of possible worlds.” Rather, it is more important

<sup>61</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 261.

to realize that the human experience is not a facile journey and that people must work diligently to improve the world.

Storgè is the voice that Handel and Morell use to raise the distinct possibility that “whatever is, is right” does not accurately describe the deity’s *modus operandi*. She remains a consistently reliable narrator of events who drives the oratorio toward its unique narrative transformation of both her husband and daughter.

It is ultimately the *Deus ex machina* in Act III that vindicates Storgè’s prescience about God’s role as patient interpreter rather than instigator of Jephtha’s misguided vow. The audience cannot claim her character as an agency of God’s will, and subsequently of Iphis’ new role as hero, until there is a definitive interaction of the heavens and the earth that resolves the nature of the deity. Lack of divine acknowledgement would leave doubt about the veracity of Storgè’s premonitions and create a dramatic ambiguity that would not gracefully close the oratorio.

Handel and Morell face a difficult balancing act with Storgè in the context of the story of Judges. Unlike the fickle gods in Euripides and Racine, the Hebrew God cannot change. God’s word and will is final, no exceptions. It is therefore imperative that Storgè’s character acknowledge God’s loving potential, lest the audience regard the eternal God as untrustworthy.

It is interesting to note that though the *Deus ex machina* legitimizes Storgè’s ideas, she is not present to experience it. It is Jephtha who ascends the mountain, and it is Iphis who prepares herself for the sacrifice. Like their biblical, Greek and French dramatic predecessors, Jephtha and Iphis do this while unaware of the deity’s true nature and ultimate intent. Storgè’s presence at the sacrifice would reduce her influence as a

dramatic counterbalance to her husband and compromise her role as an agent for the will of God. She has maintained her distance all along from Jephtha's bargain - eliminating that distance at the time of the sacrifice would risk making her complicit in Jephtha's gruesome actions.

Handel and Morell certainly acknowledged these dramatic questions while writing and compiling the oratorio. It is not by accident that we do not hear from Storgè until the second half of Act III. She has stood her ground and has nothing else to say. Some observers find it curious that Storgè, unlike Jephtha and Iphis, does not say farewell - she is, after all, Iphis' mother. However, her farewell would acknowledge the possibility of her daughter's death, thereby legitimizing the vow she heartily denounced. She must lend credence to her own objections. She cannot do this if she interacts with her daughter *en route* to the sacrifice.

## Chapter 5.

### 5.1 *Deus ex machina* and Ideals of Femininity

Heaven and Earth converge in *Jephtha* when God's angel saves Iphis from death. The *Deus ex machina* solutions that occur in Euripides' play and, rather uniquely, in Racine's play, establish a clear precedent for this dramaturgical technique. Handel's angel first speaks in a *semplice* recitative in the third act after a symphony heralds the heavenly arrival. This recitative is similar to the *accompagnato* recitative in the oratorio's first act - it is harmonically static and textually calm. The angel instructs Jephtha to withhold the slaughter.

The angel then explains that "...No vow can disannul the law of God. Nor such was its intent when rightly scanned; yet still shall be fulfilled. Thy daughter, Jephtha, thou must dedicate to God, in pure and virgin state forever." God accepts those vows that assert His unchanging characteristics and comport with his moral laws. The audience realizes with certainty in this statement that the God of this oratorio does not accept or condone human sacrifice.

The final part of the recitative is a bit more difficult to interpret. Here the composer sets the following words: "The Holy Spirit, that dictated thy vow, bade thus explain it, and approves thy faith." Winton Dean believes that God, through the ineffable Holy Spirit, placed the vow within Jephtha's heart and that the *Deus ex machina* negates both the vow and God's omnipotence. Dean concludes that God made a mistake, an assertion that would have been antithetical to both the ancient Israeli view of God and the eighteenth century Anglican concept of the deity.



The weight of the oratorio's dramatic structure, however, suggests that Handel and Morell do not intend the distinctly Christian "Holy Spirit" reference to imply that God bears responsibility for the bloody compact made by Jephtha. The composer and librettist instead use the recitative to illustrate a merciful God who recognizes that Jephtha may have pursued an inappropriate expression of fidelity, but did so motivated by an authentic spirit of holiness.

The idea that God worked through the Holy Spirit to place the vow into Jephtha's heart is inconsistent with the overall oratorio narrative. God never appears to Jephtha to demand sacrifice in the way the deity tests the faith of Abraham by appearing to him and instructing him to kill Isaac. It is Jephtha who unilaterally initiates, interprets, internalizes and pursues his covenant with God without a single word or sign of confirmation from the Almighty. It is only after Jephtha is well down the road of his tragic misinterpretation preparing to take the life of his daughter that God as patient teacher steps in to make things right.

The Holy Spirit reference also comes within the context of God finally intervening in salvation history by having the angel clarify for Jephtha that "No vow can disannul the law of God." The merciful New Testament God of Handel and Morell disapproves expressions of faith that violate the sanctity of life, but nevertheless celebrates the working of the Holy Spirit within an imperfect acolyte. Jephtha's wrongheaded vow does not mean he lacks faith. It rather shows that he does not have a clear understanding of who God is.

The Deists would easily reject this interpretation due to the angel's intervention in the lives of Jephtha and Iphis. But this is the point: God, through the angel, informs father

and daughter that human sacrifice is not His will. It is therefore a rejection of the Deist philosophy. The angel transforms “whatever is, is right” back to “what God ordains, is right.” Furthermore, the Israelites can decipher God’s will through intervention or revealed wisdom, thereby validating not only the position of the Anglican Church, but also the political system from whence it came.

It is no surprise to the audience by this time that Storgè, with her now-verified insistence that God’s will does not permit the killing of her daughter, gives Iphis the fortitude she needs to accede to the angel’s request, namely to remain a virgin for the rest of her days. Storgè foreshadowed Iphis’ virginity in the tumultuous *accompagnato* recitative in Act II. Virginity serves a complex function in *Jephtha*. Iphis’ acceptance of the virgin mantle following the *Deus ex machina* is in one sense a practical and dramatically palatable alternative to sacrifice – better chaste than dead. But the concept of virginity had far broader implications for Handel’s eighteenth-century audience, who would have seen Iphis in the context of a society in which virginity was a key social asset for women who were otherwise left outside of the propertied class.

In spite of eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideals, women in British society generally enjoyed few individual rights. Feminist author Corrinne Harol argues that in eighteenth century England, the possession of personal property defined free men. She explains:

“...Samuel Johnson, writing in the mid-eighteenth century, articulates an attitude about female sexuality that might strike a twenty-first century reader as both obvious and rather quaint. Female chastity, so the story goes, matters to men because it guarantees patrilinear legitimacy and therefore the legitimacy of patrimony: the virgin girl will seamlessly transition into the chaste wife and bear her husband’s legitimate heirs. Virginity and chastity are crucial for women but

not for men because, according to Johnson, “the man imposes no bastards on his wife.”<sup>62</sup>

The economic and social benefits of virginity took on particular significance for a culture steeped in John Locke’s view that the very purpose of human society is the protection of property. Locke extended his philosophy to government as well, believing that people gather together and submit to government expressly so that the state will protect their private property. In a post-Lockean political landscape where women had little or no opportunity to acquire property, virginity becomes one of the few tools that women could use to access power and economic security.

British audiences would further distinguish between virginity (societal perception) and chastity (no sex). Elizabeth I was far from chaste, but her decision to avoid marriage perpetuated her image as the “virgin queen.” It is a designation that gave her the authority to rule powerfully over her subjects and advisors, both male and female. Iphis’ virginity may therefore be regarded not as a sign of surrender, but as indisputable proof of her status as the exemplary protagonist within the story.

The *Deus ex machina* transforms all the characters of the oratorio. Jephtha rejoices over his daughter’s deliverance, but subsequently fades into dramatic oblivion. Iphis proves herself to be an independent woman - she embraces her virginity and confidently takes leave of Hamor. Hamor, now unmoored, realizes that he will not be a part of Jephtha’s prominent family.

The *Deus ex machina* also transforms Storgè. Her recitative and aria after the angel’s appearance marks the first time that her character appears at peace with the

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<sup>62</sup> Corrinne Harol, *Enlightened Virginity in Eighteenth Century Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

people around her. The *semplice* recitative opens with Storgè speaking directly to Iphis. We know this because composer and librettist place the stage direction “to Iphis” at the top of the number. She embraces her daughter, saying “O let me fold thee in a mother’s arms.” Her next line is remarkable, considering her fierce demeanor and questioning of God’s will in Acts I and II. She declares, “...and with submissive joy, my child receive thy designation to the life of Heaven.” Her happiness is so pervasive that analysts have argued that the passage contradicts Storgè’s conviction, which has been the moral foundation of the oratorio to this point. But the explanation for Storgè’s suddenly thankful comments is probably more human and mundane - Iphis’ virginal vow has removed from her the threat of death. Storgè finds herself reassured after the unexpected rescue of Iphis restores a clear view of the relationship between God and humanity.

She goes on to declare that “Sweet as sight to the blind, or freedom to the slave, such joy in thee I find, safe from the grave.” It marks the first time Storgè employs the word “joy” in the oratorio. She then affirms God’s decision by stating, “Still I’m of thee possessed, such is kind Heaven’s decree, that hath thy parents blessed in blessing thee.” The affirmation is all the more moving as a contrast to Storgè’s frustration, rage and worry earlier in the drama.

## 5.2 The Narrative Development of a Compositional Style

Handel maps the character changes following the divine encounter with parallel changes in musical and compositional style. Whereas Storgè’s Act I and II arias and recitatives show the tumult associated with her horrendous visions - the arias in particular

display urgent motives in conjunction with impressive contrapuntal motion - her Act III aria is soft, uncomplicated, and nearly *style galant* in its transparent grace. The opening ritornello only contains a unison violin line and a *basso continuo* line. The violin line is primarily in stepwise motion, unlike the corresponding line in the aria “Scenes of Horror, Scenes of Woe.” The 3/8 meter, combined with the frequent occurrence of sixteenth-note triplets, introduces an unhurried feeling characteristic of the whole aria.



Example 5.1: Act III, Scene II: 65. *Aria*, “Sweet as Sight to the Blind,” mm. 1–4 (Storgè).<sup>63</sup>

Handel then moves in directions that are unusual in his overall body of work. The voice enters with a restatement of the opening ritornello. Handel does not, however, use the violins to color the vocal line, which he so often does in his other arias. Only the *basso continuo* provides support to the voice. When the violins do enter, they always double the voice. It’s an unusual technique for a composer who almost always provides contrapuntal obbligato in the strings and winds. He continues to employ these techniques until the end of this rather short aria.

Neither does the aria include a *da capo* or *dal segno* marking. Handel here harkens back to older Baroque dance forms as the performers must repeat measures 33 to the end. Overall, the number has a symmetric AABB form. The only segment that is

<sup>63</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 318.

similar in form to Storgè's aria is Zebul's preceding aria. These forms may suggest that Storgè and Zebul are of a similar mind.

It is interesting to note that Jephtha, after offering a brief song of thanksgiving, no longer has an independent voice. An Israelite chorus separates Jephtha's response from the other characters' responses. Jephtha's brief words, compared to Zebul and Storgè's longer responses (and also similar in form) show that Jephtha is irretrievably isolated from his family's point of view. That isolation, and the concurrent rise of Iphis as the sacrificial hero of the tale, frame the innovative narrative structure that ultimately makes *Jephtha* palatable to both eighteenth-century and modern religious tastes.

## Chapter 6.

### 6.1 Iphis, a Likely Heroine

Handel and Morell may call their oratorio *Jephtha*, but it is Iphis who emerges as the hero whose faith ultimately rescues the composer and librettist from the Deist conundrum of a seemingly bloodthirsty God. Jephtha's unbending misinterpretation of God's will casts the leader of the battle with the Ammonites as an anti-hero amid the suffering of his family and people. The unseen battle, typical of linear plots in both Greek and French classical theater, should provide the backdrop for Jephtha's heroic deeds, but instead becomes merely an agency that enables his tragic encounter with the Almighty.

Some observers have argued that Jephtha may in fact be a tragic hero whose flaw is his decision to press forward with his vow to kill his daughter. But Jephtha sadly can't even manage the tragic hero role - he can be a tragic hero only if he carries out the sacrifice he so ardently believes God requires of him and the *Deus ex machina* removes the sacrifice. The angel of God nullifies nearly everything Jephtha believes even as it shines a light on the virtues of Iphis. The emergence of Iphis as the true hero at the expense of her father caps a literary progression that runs from the unnamed daughter in Judges, through a sort of father-daughter heroic partnership in Euripides to a Racine model that establishes for the first time the possibility of a victim taking the heroic mantle from a father as he struggles to interpret the will of God.

*Iphigenia in Aulis* simultaneously glorifies Iphigenia and her father Agamemnon when Artemis saves the daughter from her sacrificial destiny. Iphigenia takes on the

heroic role because she realizes that she must die in order to protect the Greek army. She accepts her fate as the likely savior of the nation and freely makes her way to the mountaintop altar with the same sort of courageous dignity shown by Handel's Iphis. At the same time, Euripides' Agamemnon maintains his central role in the story even as Artemis thwarts his sacrificial intentions. Agamemnon's heroic status remains secure because, unlike Jephtha who unilaterally made a vow to God, Agamemnon appears in the play as someone who has dutifully accepted a terrible responsibility placed upon him by Artemis. Agamemnon also benefits from the unpredictable and sometimes venal nature of the Greek deities. We do not know how Artemis convinced Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter, but the request is not shocking to modern spectators because classical gods, if one accepts the mythology, possess less-than-ideal human characteristics including jealousy, indecisiveness, and vindictiveness. The morally problematic nature of human sacrifice says more about the mercurial nature of the gods in Euripides than about the character of Agamemnon. He may be one of the most ambitious characters in Greek legend, but he is surprisingly sympathetic to Achilles when the warrior attempts to save Iphigenia from death. And it is only after the Greek army, frightened of military failure, threatens to rebel if Iphigenia is not killed that Agamemnon faces the reality of his vow. He is forced to choose between his family and his nation and chooses nation out of fear of the gods and his disquieted armies.

A better parallel of Iphis' heroic ascendance is found in Racine's *Iphigénie*, where the title character in effect replaces a morally flawed Agamemnon as the hero of the story. Racine's Agamemnon, unlike his Euripidean namesake, can be a petty man, chastising those with whom he disagrees. He lashes out at Achille when the warrior



vows to protect his fiancée and angrily objects to being used in Agamemnon's scheme. Told by Achille that love takes precedence over military obligations, a prickly Agamemnon tells Achille that his services are not indispensable. Agamemnon declares out of spite that he will save his daughter from death, but only if she and Achille do not marry. He then forbids his daughter and Achille from speaking to one another. Agamemnon changes his mind when Ulysse informs him of the so-called "miracle," but it is too late at that point to rescue his reputation.

Racine's Agamemnon is able to retain at least a shred of the heroic character because he shares with his Greek counterpart a dependence upon fickle gods. Diana can save Iphigénie because she has the authority to change her mind. Handel and Morell cannot approach the Hebrew God in the same manner. The ancient Israelites believe that God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and unchanging. These qualities condemn Jephtha to an even steeper fall than Racine's Agamemnon and provide an even more breathtaking rise to grace for Iphis.

It is likely, then, that Handel and Morell used Racine's Agamemnon as the model for *Jephtha's* main character and Iphigénie as a direct antecedent for Iphis. Iphis displays a staggering and complex faithfulness in the power of God and in the reliability of her father as an interpreter of God's will. Iphis, like the audiences watching the Hellenistic and French classical plays, does not know the circumstances of her father's vow. All she knows is that she is to be sacrificed because her father says he made a vow to kill whatever or whoever "saluted his eyes." Handel's audience gets to witness Jephtha's vow and knows that it is misguided. They know that his vow specifies a sacrifice and that sacrifice in the Hebrew religious tradition requires killing, usually an animal. Iphis does

not know these things nor does she foresee that God will ultimately redefine her sacrifice in an epochal shift of religious paradigm. She has, for the moment, no choice but to accept her father's interpretation of God's will.

Iphis' heroic ascendance also carries a theocratic element that parallels the Abraham and Isaac story. God rewards Abraham's faith by promising Israel's prosperity. There is an implicit connection between religion and the foundations of the state. Jephtha informs his daughter that she must be sacrificed in exchange for victory over the Ammonites. It is clear that the oratorio's characters hold fast to the notion that every selfless deed the Israelites perform is for the sake of the nation because it is a principality under God. Iphis courageously agrees to the slaughter because national loyalty is synonymous with spiritual loyalty.

Handel builds the drama of the impending sacrifice and its significance for Iphis and Jephtha methodically through Acts II and III. The first hint of the terrible reality of Jephtha's bargain comes in the Act II, Scene III recitative "Horror! Confusion!" and the subsequent aria "Open thy marble jaws." The composer makes palpable the feeling of horror by following the rather pastoral feel of Iphis' air and the chorus of virgins with a crashing *secco* E-flat major chord. This chord is a startling contrast (at least in the eighteenth century) to the G major of the aria's coda. The following recitative modulates from E-flat major to A-flat major to F minor to C minor, and finally to G minor (albeit with a picardy third). Iphis is clearly the first thing that "salutes" Jephtha's eye. Jephtha does not reveal exactly the price he must pay to make good on his vow, but the quick modulations, in combination with the sudden change of musical character between the aria and recitative, leave little doubt that something terrible is about to happen.

The image shows a musical score for a recitative piece. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is for Jephtha (J.) and the basso continuo (Cont.). The second system continues the same parts. The lyrics are in German and English. The key signature is C minor (three flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked 'Recitative'.

Example 6.1: Act II, Scene III: 39. *Recitative*, “Horror, Confusion,” mm. 1–4 (Jephtha).<sup>64</sup>

More hints about the impending events come in the subsequent aria’s opening ritornello. This ritornello, unusually angular for Handel, clearly expresses Jephtha’s sorrow and anguish. The audience gains an uneasy feeling. Handel scores the aria only for first and second violins, and *basso continuo*. This transparent texture is quite different from the more elaborate orchestration present in Iphis’ aria (complete with a chorus of virgins). The lack of wind instruments in Jephtha’s aria expresses a certain darkness that effectively evokes the main character’s mood.

The opening ritornello begins with a series of homophonic utterances. We know that the aria is in C minor by the second beat; nevertheless, the composer establishes the

<sup>64</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 212.

tonality through a minor third interval. This approach is not nearly as convincing as a vertical C minor chord on the downbeat. Handel continues the ritornello with a group of harmonically ambiguous motivic patterns. Interestingly, he keeps the homophonic and monophonic texture until the *Epilog*, when he makes a strong return to the home key of C minor. The ritornello's first two measures contain a reinforcement of the opening C minor tonality. But then, rather unexpectedly, he begins the downbeat of the third measure on a D-flat and subsequently tonicizes to F minor. Still, the composer never fully establishes the F minor tonality. He uses the F-naturals in the fourth measure as common tones, preparing cadences for a return sojourn to C minor. Handel further illustrates the unexpected harmonic shifts through displaced registers. For example, the fifth measure contains an ascending diminished seventh leap followed by an ascending octave and a fifth leap. These leaps contribute to the music's overall uneasiness.



Example 6.2: Act II, Scene III: 40. *Aria*, "Open thy Marble Jaws, O Tomb," mm. 1–6 (Jephtha).<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 213.

The predominance of rests also adds to the ritornello's dramatic sense. An eighth rest follows the first two eighth notes. The composer then follows this with a grouping of three eighth notes immediately followed by an eighth rest. The subsequent phrase is a bit longer, but it still ends abruptly with a grouping of two sixteenth notes followed by an eighth note, which in turn is followed by a quarter rest. These homophonic rests reflect almost a breathless nature, which the composer foreshadows in the preceding *semplice* recitative.

Handel uses rests to illustrate Jephtha's anguish and sorrow. In measure 20, the first and second violins, in unison, play the *Vordersatz* of the opening ritornello. However, the composer does not underpin these phrases with a *basso continuo* line. Curiously, this anomaly occurs nowhere else in the aria. This silence occurs both in the manuscripts and in subsequent published editions. Perhaps this unusually transparent line reveals the earth's hidden tomb with the *basso continuo* line representing the hidden "link" between Jephtha's vow and God's desires.

Morell's text reinforces the aria's opening ritornello. Jephtha declares, "Open thy marble jaws, o tomb, and hide me, earth, in thy dark womb." We gain additional insight in the aria's B section, a craggy A-flat utterance, where the main character cries, "ere I the name of father stain, and deepest woe from conquest gain." It is clear that Jephtha regrets his victory at the expense of his daughter. He knows that his victory was for the best, yet he clearly feels a sense of foreboding about what is to come.



Example 6.3: Act II, Scene III: 40. *Aria*, “Open thy Marble Jaws, O Tomb,” mm. 40–43 (Jephtha).<sup>66</sup>

The *semplice* recitative that follows Jephtha’s aria finally reveals the terrible cost of his misplaced interpretation of the will of God. The harmonic rhythm is static in the number’s first four measures. This music underpins Zebul’s query - he notices that Jephtha is uneasy and asks the reason. The harmonic rhythm suddenly increases upon Jephtha’s response, saying, “...behold a wretched man thrown from the summit of presumptuous joy, down to the lowest depth of misery. Know then, I vowed the first I saw should fall a victim to the living God. My daughter, alas! It was my daughter, and she dies.” It is here, and only here, that the audience realizes Jephtha’s plan in its fullness. In spite of the various foreshadowings, the main character’s announcement is still shocking.

<sup>66</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 216.

Handel exaggerates the shock in two major ways. The first is through the recitative's harmonic ambiguity. When Jephtha responds to Zebul, the composer modulates from D major to G minor to C minor to F minor, back to C minor, to D minor to A major, and finally to B minor. This is a strange harmonic journey that confuses the listener and adds to the scene's overall chaos.

The second magnification comes through yet more use of silences. Jephtha's portion of the recitative consists of short phrases punctuated by eighth rests. These rests, if taken to full performance advantage, easily illustrate the out-of-breath nature of Jephtha's explanation. There is a sharp contrast between these phrases and the main character's two final phrases. Handel precedes the line "it was my daughter" with a quarter rest and an eighth rest, respectively. He then follows this line with two quarter rests, preceding the line "and she dies."

The possibility of Iphis emerging as the hero of the oratorio indicates just how far Handel and Morell have dramatized the original Judges account with three-dimensional characters who make *Jephtha* both artistically interesting and morally logical to their audience. The daughter in Judges does not interact with Jephtha or his followers. She is a dramatic pawn, exploited for the sake of Israel's health and the biblical author's theological purposes. In a time when women were considered the property of their fathers and/or husbands, it is not surprising that Jephtha's daughter has no name or personality and might be sacrificed like a lamb on the pyre.

The dramas of Euripides and Racine introduce strong, persevering women overcoming the challenges of a predominantly patriarchal culture. These women do not change society but nevertheless make a distinctive mark on attitudes and events. Morell,

a devout Anglican priest, and Handel, the epitome of diplomacy, almost certainly did not intend to make a strong feminist statement, but they had little choice but to adapt the colorful daughter characters of the Greek and French plays because relying solely on Judges would have stripped their work of any dramatic interest and connection with their audiences.

## 6.2 A Dramaturgical Summary

A dramaturgical analysis of the biblical narrative shows its inherent weaknesses in terms of drama. The Ammonite threat to the peace and sovereignty of Israel acts as an agency that affects Jephtha's decision-making:

- Jephtha (agent), who comes to the story identified as “a mighty man of valor” realizes that he must command the Israeli forces (co-agent) against the Ammonites (counter-agent).
- He makes his ill-fated vow to God, fights the battle (without any literary details) and wins the war (purpose).
- He sees his daughter on the road home and realizes that she is the one to be sacrificed. There is no evidence that he is conflicted over this vow.
- The narrative ends when he takes his daughter up the mountain (act). The reader does not know what kind of sacrifice Jephtha executes.

The daughter remains elusive and ambiguous. She engages in no human interaction. There are instead a series of events relayed from a third-person perspective. The events that occur in the biblical narrative are merely those: events. And events,



according to basic dramaturgical principles, are unbiased and contribute little to character development or to dramatic suspense. The narrative is an account rather than a drama.

The daughter's lack of personification in Judges mirrors Jephtha's role as "persona" in the biblical narrative. If Jephtha is merely carrying out his vow according to God's demands, then his daughter's feelings are inconsequential. His daughter cannot be a character in this context because Jephtha himself is not a character. There is no conflict between Jephtha and his family because his family does not exist. Even if it does exist "offstage," it is distant, serving as a collective passive witness to the upcoming sacrifice.

The development of a fully characterized daughter through Euripides, Racine and Handel/Morell not only makes possible the drama of the encounters between gods and humans, but also brings to life the characters of the fathers who ultimately make way for the heroic women. Only a sympathetic Iphigenia could leave the Agamemnon of Euripides utterly torn between his loyalty to Artemis' demand for sacrifice and his loyalty to his family. Agamemnon fears the consequences of his vow. He cannot, for example, bring himself to admit the true nature of his message when he summons his daughter to Aulis. And his decision then to send a second note instructing his daughter not to come, possibly contradicting Artemis' will, underscores his visceral affection for a daughter far removed from the "plot device" of Judges.

Agamemnon's emotional battle continues for much of the play. He reacts with sorrow when Iphigenia enters Aulis under the mistaken impression that she is to marry Achilles. When Iphigenia hears her father's true plan and enters the stage weeping, her father is convulsed - he must carry out a sacrifice, but cannot help but be moved by his daughter's suffering. It is only the heavy hand of the military that tips the scales.

Iphigenia's sorrow, a key part of her character development, is an essential agency as it relates to her father's conflicting emotions and the army's visceral response.

Similar patterns occur in Racine's play. The opening of *Iphigénie* closely corresponds to that of *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Racine, like Euripides, realizes that Agamemnon cannot have second thoughts over his daughter's death without good reason. These reasons form Iphigénie's character, which in turn give Diana ample opportunity to save the girl.

Like Euripides, Racine illustrates a dramatic confrontation between the frightened Iphigénie and her father. Iphigénie is horrified to discover her father's plans. Racine portrays Agamemnon as both compassionate and cold-hearted. He considers letting his daughter live, something he would not entertain if Iphigénie did not evidence a character filled with courage and virtue. In the same breath, he condemns Achille for his insolence in defending Iphigénie and forbids him from marrying the daughter. These conflicts have little dramatic effect absent a real daughter character, one who loves Achille and who musters staggering dignity given her plight. The audience is instantly able to understand why Agamemnon is conflicted.

More importantly, the dramatic rendering of Iphigénie by Racine creates the pathway for the transfer of heroic status from father to daughter. If Iphigénie lacked an independent voice, she would not be able to express the ideas that give her father second thoughts, nor would the audience be able to judge her tenacious, admirable qualities without a side-by-side comparison to her father's duty-bound priorities.

Handel and Morell use the same strategy to define the character of Iphis as a compelling and human counterpoint to Jephtha. Iphis' character serves as an agency for

Jephtha as his less admirable, though equally genuine, traits pave the way for his disappearance from the drama. Iphis must say yes to her father and accept her sacrificial fate in the second and third acts. If Iphis does not, then Jephtha's character cannot make way for her emergence as the oratorio's hero. Morell's narrative, like Racine's, needs Iphis to counteract Jephtha, lest he devolve into a mere persona.

Iphis and Jephtha begin their complex interaction with Iphis' recitative "Hail, glorious conqueror" in Act II. She is pleased with her father's victory over the Ammonites. After all, now that the war is over, she can marry Hamor. It is only later in Act II that Jephtha, having already told his wife and brother about his vow, learns that Iphis is aware that she must give up her life to satisfy the will of God. Her confirmation of the impending event reinforces doubts about Jephtha's moral judgment and illustrates clearly the pain he has caused. The paths of the two characters begin to diverge. Jephtha reacts with sadness and doubt. Iphis carries herself with stoic resignation. She enters with a *semplice* recitative in the opening of Act II, Scene IV, declaring, "Such news flies swift – I've heard the mournful cause of all your sorrows. Of my father's vow, Heaven spoke its approbation by success – Jephtha has triumphed. Israel is free!" This is the only time in the recitative where she refers to herself in the first person. She acknowledges her father's vow, asking not why her father made it, but accepting its consequences.

Handel takes the unusual step of following this *semplice* recitative with an *accompagnato* recitative. The audience has not experienced an *accompagnato* recitative since Jephtha's solemn vow. This is no coincidence. Iphis must react to the vow for the drama to continue. The material in this *accompagnato* recitative reinforces Iphis' commitment to the sacrifice. She believes that her death represents the will of God and

proclaims that “for joys so vast, too little is the price of one poor life; but oh! I accept it, Heaven a grateful victim. And thy blessings still pour on my country, friends, and dearest father.” It is a statement of courage, as well as a display of the complicated interaction of loyalty to God and country.

IPHIS

I. Für solch ein Heil, wie klein doch ist der Preis nur ei - nes  
For joys so vast, too litt - le is the price of one poor

Lebens! O Herr, nimm gnädig mich als Op-fer an, seg - ne stets mein  
life but oh! ac - cept it, Heav'n, a grateful vic - tim, and thy blessings

Volk, all mei-ne Freunde und den teu-ren Va-ter!  
still, pour on my country, friends, and dearest fa-ther!

Example 6.4: Act II, Scene IV: 47. *Accompagnato*, “For Joys so Vast,” mm. 1–10 (Iphis).<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 261.

Iphis then performs an aria that affirms her willingness to die, but also lays bare her fears about the future. Her *accompagnato* recitative ends on an F-sharp minor chord (with a picardy third). This chord serves as the dominant chord of the aria's B minor. There is no opening ritornello, but instead a B minor chord on the downbeat, marked *piano* by the composer. It is probably not a coincidence that Handel excludes an opening ritornello. Practically speaking, the presence of the ritornello would render the preceding recitative less meaningful and intrude upon continuity. It is also important to note that the composer follows Jephtha's *accompagnato* recitative with a *semplice* recitative. As a result, the structure of Iphis' Act II music is unique within the oratorio. The form underscores the somber nature of what Iphis is about to do. She accepts her fate, but does not celebrate it.

**Largo e piano**  
IPHIS

I. Heil sei Euch! Des Le - bens Glück laß ich  
Hap - py they! this vi - tal breath with con -

VI. I/II  
Va., Cont.

I. gem bei euch zu - rück, laß ich  
- tent I shall re - sign, with con -

Example 6.5: Act II, Scene IV: 48. *Aria*, “Happy They,” mm. 1–6 (Iphis).<sup>68</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 243.

Iphis' aria conjures the spirit of the preceding *semplice* recitative. She speaks of others' happiness, but remains unshaken about the approach of death. Perhaps she would rather not think of it. Iphis proclaims in her aria, "Happy they; this vital breath with content I shall resign, and not murmur, or repine, sinking in the arms of death." Contrast her heroic selflessness with Jephtha's self-serving surrender to adversity in the aria "Open Thy Marble Jaws, O Tomb." Jephtha persists in his lachrymose musings in his aria in the opening of Act III when he speaks of "a father's woe."

The brevity of Iphis' aria is also an unexpected contrast to the other characters' reactions to the unfortunate series of events. It is a *dal segno* aria merely 35 measures in length. Jephtha's "Open Thy Marble Jaws, O Tomb" is noticeably longer at 57 measures. Its brevity, on one level, may embody her admirable modesty, though a more practical possibility is that it reflects her anxiety in the face of her own demise. In either case, the opposing dramatic journeys of Jephtha and Iphis are well underway.

Handel and Morell must transform Jephtha's daughter from a passive bystander in her father's story to an independent woman with thoughts, dreams, and opinions. The need to build a life for Iphis is one of the primary reasons the librettist includes Hamor's character. On a purely narrative level, Hamor initially enhances and defines Iphis' character because of his unique ability to coax certain character qualities out of her. The audience as a result has the unique opportunity to get to know Iphis before the major dramatic events take place.

The Act I, Scene III stage directions instruct Hamor and Iphis to enter together. Iphis thus appears in the drama under the protection of Hamor, who as a male automatically enjoys a higher social status. Iphis nevertheless appears overjoyed with her

betrothal. Hamor begins the *semplice* recitative with the words, “Happy this embassy, my charming Iphis, which once more gives thee to my longing eyes.” The language suggests that Hamor perceives Iphis as a possession to be transferred from father to husband, a view that would have conformed to the social norms of both the ancient world and eighteenth-century England. Hamor continues to balance the affectionate with the patronizing by ending the recitative declaring, “O haste, and make my happiness complete!” It is at once a strong declaration of love and a command to Iphis to return his affections.

Hamor does not relish the prospect of leaving his beloved Iphis to fight alongside Jephtha against the Ammonites. The composer encapsulates these mixed feelings of joy and consternation in the following aria. The first measure of the opening ritornello is rather subdued: the basso continuo sets the E major tonality, while the first violins enter with an expressive motive consisting of an ascending octave leap followed by a descending tritone line. The A-sharp at the end of the tritone phrase signifies Hamor’s longing to be with Iphis.

The character of the ritornello suddenly changes in the middle of the second measure. The first violins begin a sequence of motives consisting of a thirty-second note immediately followed by a dotted sixteenth note. All thirty-second notes occur on the primary beats. The passage is reminiscent of a Lombardian rhythm. In this context, the rhythm illustrates a dogged, longing feeling quite different from the opening measure’s rhythms, sounding almost like an uncontrollable pant.



Example 6.6: Act I, Scene III: 10. *Aria*, “Dull Delay, in Piercing Anguish,” mm. 1–2 (Hamor).<sup>69</sup>

Sure enough, Hamor affirms his inner conflicts in the opening text: “Dull delay, in piercing anguish, bids the faithful lover languish.” It is a tribute to Handel’s dramatic style that he so effectively uses music to illustrate this cognitive dissonance. The aria’s A section continues until the second beat of measure 13. Suddenly, the two violin parts drop out and the voice continues only with the *basso continuo* line, signifying the “languishing of the faithful lover,” who is presumably Hamor himself. The sparse orchestration reappears in the opening of the aria’s B section on the words “O with gentle smiles relieve me; let no more false hope deceive me, nor vain fears inflict a pain.” Iphis is his love, yet he must put his feelings aside and perform his civic and military duties. He uses this aria to demand emotional comfort from his beloved.

Iphis responds to Hamor’s recitative and aria with the first sign of her independence and strength. She begins her recitative, a number with slow harmonic rhythm, with the words “Ill suits the voice of love when glory calls, and bids thee follow Jephtha to the field.” The message - stop complaining and perform your service for the people of Israel. She says that serving in the upcoming battle requires sacrifice, duty, and

<sup>69</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 52.



honor. She reminds Hamor that his valor in the face of impending danger will certainly endear him to his future father-in-law, Jephtha.

Iphis turns sympathetic in the following aria. She reveals that she loves Hamor and attempts to comfort him. Handel illustrates this gesture of consolation through the opening ritornello, a pastoral dance in a 6/8 meter. The compound meter and dotted rhythms are reminiscent of the more famous aria from *Messiah*, “He shall feed His Flock Like a Shepherd.” Both arias promise peace at the conclusion of epic struggles. Iphis proclaims to Hamor, “Take the heart you fondly gave, lodg’d in your breast with mine. Thus with ardor brave, sure conquest shall be thine.”



Example 6.7: Act I, Scene III: 12. *Aria*, “Take the Heart You Fondly Gave,” mm. 1–4 (Iphis).<sup>70</sup>

Iphis’ approach may be pastoral, but she is unmistakably *commanding* her fiancé to be strong. She does not plead, nor does she ask with a meek spirit. Iphis tells Hamor to be brave, so he may prove himself worthy of her father’s respect and ultimately her love. Iphis’ marching orders are unusually harsh for a female character in a biblically inspired

<sup>70</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 58.

narrative. Hamor confirms her strong personality in the recitative following Iphis' pastoral aria. He declares, "I go. My soul, inspired by thy command, thirsts for the battle. I'm already crowned with the victorious wreath; and thou, fair prize, more worth than fame or conquest, thou art mine." Hamor may view Iphis as a prize or conquest, but he also accepts her so-called "command" as a call to military heroism.

The two characters find common ground and affirm their mutual commitment in the following duet. They agree that the upcoming battle on behalf of Israel is just. The fact that the duet reinforces Iphis' aria, and not Hamor's, lets the audience know that Iphis is a formidable character ready to be tested in the oratorio's later acts. The series of arias, duets, and recitatives allow us to see that Hamor's character reinforces Iphis' and not the other way around.

Handel and Morell face a narrative dilemma at this point with Hamor and Iphis. The writers introduce the characters as a pair. Now that we know that Iphis is strong, we no longer need Hamor to serve as character mediator. Hamor's character must move into the background to allow more emphasis on Iphis' personal burdens. Jephtha's eyes fall on Iphis, not on Hamor. She must die on her own, without the love of Hamor. Composer and librettist gradually sever the ties between the two characters in Acts II and III. The narrative separation does not imply that Hamor ignores Iphis in her time of need. His Act II *secco* recitative and subsequent aria show that he is willing to die for love's sake. He is like Achilles and Achille in *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigénie* with one important difference - Hamor makes his protestations after the Israelites have vanquished the Ammonites, while Achilles and Achille do so before the Trojan War battles begin. It's a

significant deviation in the oratorio's dramatic agencies as they relate to the classical models.

Achilles and Achille promise to protect their respective fiancées, but these promises come at extraordinary risk to both men. Artemis and Diana require sacrificial offerings. The soldiers acknowledge the goddess' will and understand that the horrible sacrifice will help them win the battle against the Trojans. It's no surprise that in the shadow of battle, the Greek army threatens to rebel (Euripides) and Agamemnon threatens to relieve Achille of his prestigious position (Racine).

Hamor's promises are not nearly as courageous. Like Jephtha, he appears more wrapped up in the egotistical maelstrom of his own sadness than with Iphis' well being. He screams in his Act II recitative, "If such thy cruel purpose; lo! Your friend offers himself a willing sacrifice, to save the innocent and beauteous maid." It's the apotheosis of the patronizing warrior come to make all things right for the innocent young woman. Hamor's tumultuous aria following the recitative underscores his immodesty. The opening ritornello contains a *gigue*-like grouping of motives in G major, but the overall harmonic motion remains static. The violins, *basso continuo*, and oboes merely outline the aria's G major tonic. As a result, the motive groupings sound royal, especially with the piercing oboe color. Hamor then enters in the aria's A section with the following words: "On me, let blind mistaken zeal her utmost rage employ." Give Hamor credit – he is clearly willing to die for the sake of love. But his music is not subtle. In fact, the A section, from measures one to 24, seems to glorify Hamor's promises as an almost militaristic obligation, as if he is still fighting the Ammonites.

Handel begins the aria's B section with a completely different character. He takes away the oboes and temporarily eschews the groupings of homophonic sixteenth notes. In addition, the composer marks this section as *piano* and *dolce*. Handel scored the B section to be far more introspective than the A section, and it confirms our suspicions of Hamor's motives. He states, "Twill be a mercy there to kill, where life can taste no joy." In other words, it might be better for Iphis to die, lest her life be rendered worthless.

Hamor severely underestimates Iphis' strength of purpose. That strength of purpose makes Iphis ascendant through the *Deus ex machina* and finally separates her from her onetime warrior protector. After Hamor's aria, Handel places him in the quartet in which he, Zebul, Jephtha and Storgè plead for Iphis' release, to no avail. His musical role in the quartet is not nearly as important as that of Jephtha or Storgè. Handel scores the quartet as if the characters are speaking over each other. The hubbub neuters Hamor's pleas and further separates him from Iphis' destiny. The *Deus ex machina* allows Iphis to live, but with the caveat that she must remain a virgin for the remainder of her days. She has proven her independence and no longer needs a male to affirm her powerful status. Hamor witnesses these events and realizes that he cannot marry Iphis. He says in his Act III recitative, "With transport, Iphis, I behold thy safety, but must forever mourn so dear a loss: dear! Though Jephtha were to honor me still with the name of son."

Hamor, for all his egocentricity, is not without feelings for Iphis. His *andante* aria in F major is pastoral in feel, and the harmonic language is rather conventional. He explains that he understands God's will, but will forever care for Iphis (from a distance). The aria's A section shows Hamor coming to terms with his newfound position. The B

section reveals a poignant yearning that only love can justify. Hamor declares that “While thus each charm and beautiful line with more than human lustre shine...”

So strahlt dein Reiz und holde Zier in mehr als  
 While thus each charm and beautiful line with more than

Cont.  
 [P]

ird' - - schem Glan - ze mir, so  
 hu - - man lus - tre shine, while

Example 6.8: Act III, Scene II: 67. Aria, “Tis Heaven’s All-Ruling Power,” mm. 98–105 (Hamor).<sup>71</sup>

The composer and librettist paint Iphis’ selfless, heroic nature in bold strokes during the following recitative and aria. Her recitative, in a slow harmonic rhythm, outlines her first meaningful reaction to her new lifestyle. She does not focus upon herself, but rather, offers consolation to Hamor, in stark contrast to that character’s final recitative and aria. She avoids self-reflection and says, “My faithful Hamor, may that Providence which gently claims, or forces our submission, direct thee to some happier

<sup>71</sup> Georg Friedrich Händel, *Jephtha: Oratorium in Drei Akten*, HWV 70, ed. Wolfgang Schäfer, 31654 C.F. Peters (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1990), 328.

choice.” Iphis alludes to the pain of submission, but, as in Act I, moves beyond her shock to urge her former fiancé to accept his lot and move on with life.

The theme of Iphis’ faithfulness continues in the following aria. She gives voice in the A section, “Freely I to Heaven resign, all that is in Hamor mine,” to both her devotion to God and her independence from Hamor. She then addresses Hamor, proclaiming, “Joys triumphant crown thy days, and thy name eternal praise.” The requirement of virginity has, incredibly, not left her pondering her own fate but encouraging the people around her. She does so again in the aria’s B section, when she acknowledges her perpetual virginity for the first time before turning her attention to Hamor. She says, “Great the bliss assigned to me; greater still attend on thee.” Iphis cannot undo God’s will so she gives up her expectations of happiness and asks for Hamor’s empathy. The selfless sacrificial victim has proven herself far stronger than the self-absorbed warriors in the story. The audience, likely impressed by her thoughts and deeds, can no longer doubt Iphis’ nobility or greatness.

Handel added a quintet for the oratorio’s third performance that underscores the degree to which the composer elevates Iphis to an exalted status above the other characters in the oratorio. The quintet is an effective dramatic tool that every conductor and producer should include in his or her performance of *Jephtha*. The composer uses the same text (though different melodic and harmonic motives) as the preceding aria to reinforce Iphis’ stature. Hamor finally realizes Iphis’ commitment to remaining a virgin and lets her go. The quintet’s B section includes several homophonic responses from the oratorio’s remaining characters, Zebul, Storgè, and Jephtha. Remarkably, they repeat Iphis’ words from the B section of the preceding aria, “Joys triumphant crown thy days,

and thy name eternal praise.” The characters accept Iphis’ fate and subsequently, God’s will. It is the only place in the oratorio where all five main characters perform together. The quintet thus marks a significant change for characters who could never find common ground on the legitimacy of Jephtha’s vow or the battle with the Ammonites. God’s will is finally clear.

The quintet also illustrates Jephtha’s isolation after the rescue of his daughter. It is only through the angel that Jephtha understands his folly. The divine intervention leaves him powerless and characterless. Jephtha is reduced to singing the “Joys triumphant” text together with fellow characters Zebul and Storgè. If Jephtha were the hero of this oratorio, he would surely have retained a more prominent musical role in the final part of the third act, including this quintet.





The diverging dramatic arcs of Iphis and Jephtha are now complete. Those arcs provide the narrative path that allows Handel and Morell to figuratively join their characters in proclaiming, “Joys triumphant crown thy days, and thy name eternal praise” to a God who graciously intervenes in the history of people who chronically misunderstand His will. God saves the courageous Iphis from death and imposes upon her a perpetual virginity that for Handel’s audience confers a sense of power and independence.

### 6.3 Conclusion

Handel and Morell's use of an uncharacteristically asymmetrical dramatic structure in *Jephtha* to elevate Iphis to the role of hero strongly suggests that the two men were moving beyond the classical and neoclassical forms they knew so well and integrating popular eighteenth-century theatrical styles such as melodrama and she-tragedy. The new styles provided them with just the dramatic accelerant they needed to complete the transformation of Jephtha's daughter from the cardboard figure of Judges to the towering and emotionally transfixing woman of the oratorio.

Melodrama, first seen in the middle of the eighteenth century, eschewed the formal parameters of classicism and instead attempted to elicit strong emotional responses. Writers often achieved these responses through sudden stylistic changes within a singular scene or thought. The she-tragedy appeared in late seventeenth century England as an alternative to traditional heroic dramas. She-tragedy leaves behind the familiar male hero and his military and sexual conquests in favor of a woman who sacrifices something dear because of circumstances outside her control. Some believe the she-tragedy emerged due to the proliferation of talented female actresses in eighteenth century Britain, while others speculate that the style represented a gradual shift in contemporary social and class norms.

Handel and Morell produced most of their creative work from a wellspring of classical and French dramatic structures based on unities of action, time and place.

Aristotle, in his treatise on Hellenistic poetics, refers to the unity of action while defining the tragedy:

“Now, according to our definition, Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, of a certain magnitude. As therefore, in other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of the action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole.”<sup>73</sup>

A play, according to Aristotle, should contain only one narrative. Subplots and scene changes are distractions. Time, according to the philosopher, also constrains and defines tragedy:

“Epic poetry agrees with Tragedy insofar as it is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type. They differ, in that Epic poetry admits but one kind of meter, and is narrative in form. They differ, again, in their length: for Tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed the limit; whereas the Epic action has no limits of time.”<sup>74</sup>

Aristotle never defined a unity of place, but scholars and dramatists from the Middle Ages to Handel’s own time assumed that Aristotelian logic dictated that there be no scene changes in plays. Characters did not move from one location to another despite the sweeping scope of classical drama that dealt with wars, political intrigue, and epic journeys.

The Aristotelian unities profoundly influenced French theater throughout the seventeenth century. Racine and many other playwrights in the court of Louis XIV, most notably Molière, used strict classic structures in their most distinguished works. Racine’s *Iphigénie* contains a linear plot in which each character contributes to the singular narrative with no subplots. The playwright also creates a unity of place with the single

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<sup>73</sup> S.H. Butcher, trans., *The Poetics of Aristotle* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), accessed 12 June 2012, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1974>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

scene direction, “The scene is at Aulis, in Agamemnon’s tent.” There are no explicit or implicit scene changes.

Like most French works of the period, *Iphigénie* follows a five-act pattern with the most dramatic actions occurring in the third and fourth acts. Clytemnestre discovers her husband’s true plans in the middle of the third act, which is, not coincidentally, the center of the play. The author subsequently uses Act IV to gauge the characters’ reactions to the tragic news. Racine also writes the play in strict Alexandrine verse, a poetic form containing 12 syllables per line. The author always groups these verses in rhyming couplets. These strictures enabled Racine to produce a beautifully proportioned work that pays homage to Euripides without plagiarizing him.

French classical dramatic models became quite popular among educated Britons beginning in the late seventeenth century. The writer, poet, and literary critic John Dryden extolled the virtues of the French masters both in his criticism and in his own plays. Like Racine, Dryden often used Alexandrine verse within well-proportioned forms. These characteristics defined several British playwrights’ works well into the eighteenth century. Both Handel and Morell knew these forms and employed them in several works.

They employ them in *Jephtha*, though with significant variations. For example, though the oratorio contains three well-proportioned acts with unified actions and times, the acts do not necessarily correspond to classical dramatic high points. Handel and Morell appear to maintain Racine’s sense of symmetry by placing Jephtha’s admission of his vow in a recitative in the middle of the second act, but a closer inspection reveals that the oratorio’s main dramatic action occurs from numbers 35 to 61, making the dramatic

action seem lopsided. The uneven structure may owe something to practical considerations such as the presence of substantial prologues and character introductions, but the changes indicate at a minimum that Handel and Morell are not afraid to break the classical mold.

The more important changes come when Handel and Morell impose the musical style changes characteristic of melodrama and she-tragedy during the third act of *Jephtha*. Handel introduces the style changes beginning with Zebul's hearty congratulations in numbers 62 and 63. This shift does not reflect the well-proportioned principles of Aristotle or the French classicists. The music becomes less contrapuntal and adheres less to traditional Baroque dance and ritornello forms. The style change adds dramatic heft to the intersection between the divine and temporal realms as represented by the angel. The angel exposes Jephtha's erroneous interpretation of God's will while affirming Iphis as a good, faithful servant of the deity. The music and text provide a sharp contrast to the tension, anger, and sadness prevalent in the preceding numbers. The deity appears not in the background, as in Racine, but rather as an integral part of the action, as illustrated by the angel's appearance. This emotional paradigm shift reflects a use of melodrama unseen in Handel's other oratorios.

Handel and Morell may have been influenced by the she-tragedy in tracing the intersecting heroic arcs of Jephtha and Iphis. Greek and French theater did not typically transfer mantles of heroism from one character to another, least of all from a man to a woman. But Iphis' strength and independence, though differing in destiny, is similar to the tragic female figures prevalent in the eighteenth century she-dramas.<sup>75</sup> Her newfound

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<sup>75</sup> Lisa A. Freeman, *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 123-24.

heroism not only justifies Jephtha's decline, but also affirms the quality and necessity of the Act III post-angel music.

Far from joining the Deists in rejecting the problematic Judges story about the will of God manifesting itself in human sacrifice, Handel and Morell ultimately rescue the story by creating a fully realized dramatic account of the dangers that free will creates for the relationship between God and humanity. The transformation requires far more narrative and musical contortion than *Messiah* or *Judas Maccabaeus*, and the thin performance history of *Jephtha* may indicate that the composer and librettist only partially succeeded in their quest.

Having demonstrated that classical and French Baroque tragedies provided a model for the definition of dramaturgical agencies, the clear departures by Handel and Morell from these models, and the way in which the role of hero is shifted from men to women, suggest that contrary to recent opinion, *Jephtha* may have been a locus of experimentation and transition for Handel and Morell. Handel and Morell's new approach to the form of the oratorio suggests that, contrary to Winton Dean's dismissal, the story still has much to say about a society concerned with war, the conflict of duty and love, the assimilation of biblical narratives as symbols for British self-definition, the changing role of women, changing social paradigms, and the sometimes inscrutable word of God.

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