

ET IN ARCADIA - ELISSA'S GLOW / DRAFT AND FANTASY

Nol de Koning
ET IN ARCADIA
Elyssa's glow

DRAFT
AND
FANTASY

for
an one-act
operatic play
with for scenes,
an intro,
three interludes
and a final

ANTRUM BOEK - AMSTERDAM

To Flip Schouten

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NB

this booklet is a *typoscript* in which the original Dutch text has been translated into English by Google Translate.

So this booklet is a provisional temporary english version only for documentation purposes.

The correct and authorized translation into English is being worked on.

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Aeneas (...) set course resolutely (...). As he sailed he looked back to walled Carthage, now aglow with tragic Dido's flames. (...) the Trojans knew how bitter are the agonies when intense love is outraged (...) and the knowledge started a train of thought sombre with presentiment.

The Aeneid V 1-7, translated by W. F. Jackson Knight, 1956

It seems clear that Palinurus (...) recognized that this storm could not be ridden out because he knew it followed on Aeneas' betrayal of Dido. He also read the true meaning of the fire which they had seen and from that moment realized that Aeneas was guilty of hubris and impiety; he was 'not the Messiah'.

Cyril Connolly (Palinurus), The Unquiet Grave, 1944, p.130

Instructions for the reader

It is certainly true that the epic from the time of the Roman emperor Augustus represents to some extent a political ideology, and so does Virgil's *Aeneid* on which the story of my fantasy *Elissa's glow* is based. Or as the Dutch classicist David Rijser succinctly put it in a paper on this subject: 'in Augustan Rome *the medium is the message*'.¹ In the course of the last century, however, people came to the idea that the *Aeneid* is not just a praise of Augustus to grant the emperor a divine lineage and his empire a divine legitimation, but, in the words of the British classicist J.F Jackson Knight, also an attack on Augustus and his autocracy. A vision that really appealed to me when I started working on my video installation *Palinuro* in 1988 and has had a great influence on that video work and on the work that has emerged from it.

This is also the case with the present concept for a operatic theater piece, which I see as a sequel to that video work and the related works. In this draft plan (concept and fantasy) I will therefore briefly pay attention to how Virgil's main work can be interpreted as a skeptical piece about the history and realization of Augustus' utopia. Or as Jackson Knight put it: "Virgil knew the cost of Empire; the cost to suffering, and the cost to conscience and to so many graceful things."²

The ambiguity in the message of the *Aeneid* - Virgil's two voices: a *public voice* and a *private voice* - is still a subject of discussion in academic circles, although the contradictions have weakened and other voices - *other* and *further voices* - have also started to be heard. That is the power of a great work of art and also the inspiring thing about it, that its layered message is not dogmatically unambiguous and never fully reveals its deepest intentions. I consider Virgil, even though the

Aeneid was written for political purposes at the behest of Augustus, first and foremost a *poet* and not a licking propagandist. And his main work not as a propagandistic poem of praise but as a work of art in the true sense of the word, with all the freedom that *ipso facto* entails. For me, it is precisely the poet's different voices - openly and secretly at the same time, in an almost ironic manner - that make the work still able to inspire. ³

In my closet opera *The K of Skylla*, Aeneas' helmsman Palinurus was the protagonist of Virgil's private voice. That is still the case and also in this concept for a operatic theatre piece, which I have called *Et in Arcadia - Elissa's glow* and which is a sequel to this closet opera. Be it that Palinurus is now absent as an acting character and is only present in the spirit, since he met his death in what preceded it and now, unreachable to us, wanders as a shadow in the underworld. (Just like Elyssa of Carthage, who is usually, although not always, also called Dido in the *Aeneid*.) Virgil's private voice - and it will be clear: with which I am only too happy to agree - is now voiced by three visionaries, Cassandra, Deiphobe and Hekalene. And by Helena Neaira, a daughter of Helen of Sparta and Troy, glorified as an adoptive muse, who still strives for a union with Palinurus even though he has also become inaccessible to her.

According to the Australian classicist H. Slaney, it has been recognized since the eighteenth century that melancholy is a defining characteristic of the *Aeneid* and that the attention to the political undertone is something of recent times. ⁴ But even though the latter no longer predominates: the melancholic musings are still there, although according to Slaney it will now be difficult for novelists and poets to approach the *Aeneid* as a source text without a certain degree of parody, irony or at least cynical disappointment. And this also applies, let the reader be clear, to the apparently exalted story - *my* exalted story - that underlies the fantasy of this draft plan, as well as to the often high-minded underlying thoughts that are unfolded in it.

Nol de Koning, spring 2022

DRAFT AND FANTASY



THE STORY

(1) What came before.

During the fall of Troia, the Troian prince Aineias fled the city with a group of Troian men and women, including his father and son, and mysteriously lost his wife. She is not one of the group of Troian women who are taken to Greece as slaves or concubines of the conquerors; it may be assumed that she died during the fall of Troy.¹

Kassandra, the king's daughter who had predicted Troia's downfall but was not believed by anyone, has been captured as the future concubine of the Greek leader Agamemnon. She cherishes a secret, only partially requited love for Aineias.² Because of her predictive gifts, she knows that Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks, will be murdered by his wife and her lover upon his return to Greece, and that as Agamemnon's concubine she also will be killed.

Aineias and his followers have gathered on a hill just outside the burning Troia. With their flight and voluntary exile, they responded to the divine command to Aineias to found a new Troia with a number of companions in Italy.

Among Aineias' followers are Palinouros, who will be appointed helmsman of the admiral's ship yet to be built, and the trumpeter Misenos, Aineias' future herald and army commander. During their flight, Misenos, at the behest of Aineias, took away a young woman named Helena Neaira. She is the daughter of Helena, who was kidnapped from Sparta to Troia by the Troian prince Paris and because of whom the Greeks started a war with Troia. Out of revenge for the destruction of his city, Aineias would have preferred to take Helen away himself, but he had stuck with Helen's daughter because of the protection she enjoyed from Zeus and his mother Aphrodite.³

Even before the expedition begins, Palinouros is already somewhat disturbed by the brutal way in which the young Helen is treated by Misenos and the other Trojans.