

Trojan, and carry with him omens of our death.”

Dido’s fate, written by Virgil as part of his attempt to glorify the authoritarian and imperial Rome of Augustus Caesar, is to die for love. Aeneas’ fate is to live in the annals of poetry as the ultimate symbol of those who choose obedience (and the gods) over love. An entire tradition of later poetry will take Aeneas to task, including John Milton, who will write his Adam as the founder of a world (not merely a city) who chooses love over God. This tradition has its deepest roots in the poet who most admired Virgil’s skill, and most despised his politics: Ovid—whose more serious side becomes evident in the way he treats Dido, giving her a voice and a dignity that Virgil denied her.

IV

Responses to and Rewritings of Aeneas and Dido: Ovid

Dido is a character Ovid would (and does) sympathize with. Aeneas—the curiously dispassionate son of the goddess of love, and the unquestioningly obedient servant of power—is the character that Virgil would have his readers admire. We are assured by some classical scholars that later readings that sympathize with Dido and find Aeneas a combination of inexplicable and abhorrent are wrong because Romans would have read the poem in favor of Aeneas. For example, R.G. Austin insists that we need to understand the difference between the way we are tempted to see Aeneas, and the way Romans of the Augustan era would have reacted to him: “His speech, though we may not like it, was the Roman answer to the conflict between two compelling forms of love, an answer such as a Roman Brutus once gave, when he executed his two sons for treason against Rome.”¹⁵⁶ But what of Ovid? What of the many Roman readers who read, enjoyed, and admired Ovid’s verse? What of the many readers delighted by the *Amores* and the *Ars Amatoria*? Were they not Romans as well? Despite Augustus, Rome was no more monolithic in its literary and political sympathies than had been Athens before it, or would be London after it.

Ovid’s most famous treatment of the episode is quite short, but more in line with what might be expected from the author of the *Amores* than with the author of the *Aeneid*. His focus is on Dido, the pain she feels on the loss of Aeneas, and her death. Aeneas is not given more than a sidelong glance in the few lines Ovid spends on the story in his *Metamorphoses*:

excipit Aenean illic animoque domoque
 non bene discidium Phrygiū latura mariti
 Sidonis; inque pyra sacri sub imagine facta
 incubuit ferro deceptaque decipit omnes.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ R.G. Austin. *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Quartus*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1955), 106.

¹⁵⁷ Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. 14.78-82. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 332.

Aeneas received there her heart and home,
 but she could not well abide parting from her Phrygian husband;
 On a fire intended for sacred rites, she fell upon her sword,
 Deceiving all, as she had been deceived.

Ovid's treatment of the relationship, described in terms of a marriage in these sparse lines, takes on a more expansive and unqualifiedly pro-Dido tone in *The Heroides*. Peter Knox argues that the *Heroides* are "an early work, contemporary with the earliest *Amores*."¹⁵⁸ If so, the sensitivity displayed by a poet still in his twenties makes it hard to understand what those critics who regard Ovid as having "excessive desire for himself"¹⁵⁹ are reading when they read Ovid. As Richard Tarrant reads Ovid's treatment of Dido, however, it "constitutes one of the earliest surviving reactions to the *Aeneid*, and one of the boldest. Ovid revises both Dido's character, making her more loving even at the end, but also more scathing about Aeneas."¹⁶⁰

Writing a letter to Aeneas from Dido's point of view, Ovid's *Heroides* 7, "Dido to Aeneas," is one of the single most heart-wrenching things that ever came from his pen, and gives the lie to scholarly insistence that the Roman answer to Dido would have been the one Virgil gave to Aeneas. Ovid writes Dido as someone who sees through the pro-imperial Roman propaganda of the Augustan regime, and no more reads things *the single right Roman way* than Ovid does himself:

Ovid's Dido is clearly, recognisably similar to Vergil's Dido, and yet there are some differences. She seems a little wiser, a little sharper than in her earlier incarnation. She has, as it were, the advantage of having already 'lived' the story once, in the *Aeneid*, and this time round she emerges as a more rational and more perceptive woman. [...] In the *Aeneid*, Dido seems never quite able to accept that wandering has now become a fundamental part of Aeneas' character. [...] Ovid's Dido, by contrast, can see that Aeneas is the kind of man who needs to keep moving, and who avoids facing up to the things he has done by simply leaving town. This Dido sees Aeneas as addicted to wandering, and doomed to the repetition of his mistakes.¹⁶¹

Ovid's Dido does not go wild with anger as does Virgil's, does not call down curses, and make predictions of catastrophic future wars between her people and Aeneas' people; she merely tells Aeneas, sadly, that he will never find another love like hers:

quando erit, ut condas instar Karthaginis urbem
 et videas populos altus ab arce tuos?

¹⁵⁸ Peter E. Knox. "The Heroides: Elegaic Voices." In *Brill's Companion to Ovid*. Edited by Barbara Weiden Boyd. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2002), 120.

¹⁵⁹ Sharrock, 293.

¹⁶⁰ Richard Tarrant. "Ovid and Ancient Literary History." In *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*. Edited by Philip R. Hardie. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 25.

¹⁶¹ Rebecca Armstrong. *Ovid and His Love Poetry*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), 111.

omnia ut eveniant, nec di tua vota morentur,
unde tibi, quae te sic amet, uxor erit?
Uror ut inducto ceratae sulphure taedae,
ut pia fumosis addita tura rogis.
Aeneas oculis vigilantis semper inhaeret;
Aenean animo noxque diesque refert.
ille quidem male gratus et ad mea munera surdus
et quo, si non sim stulta, carere velim.
non tamen Aenean, quamvis male cogitat, odi,
sed queror infidum quæstaque peius amo.¹⁶²

When will you establish a city like Carthage,
and see the people from your own high citadel?
Should all take place exactly in the event as in your prayers,
Where will you find the lover who loves as I do?
I burn, like waxen torches covered with sulfur,
as the pious incense placed upon a smoking altar.
Aeneas, to you my waking eyes were always drawn;
Aeneas lives in my heart both night and day.
But he is ungrateful, and spurns my gifts,
and were I not a fool, I would be rid of him.
Yet, however ill he thinks of me, I cannot hate him.
I complain of his faithlessness, but my love's passion grows.

Ovid also catches Aeneas's odd remark about having not given his wife a single thought while helping his father and son escape the burning walls of Troy. He gives Dido a sharp, yet gentle response, far from the raving to which Virgil subjects her. In her Ovidian letter, she reproves Aeneas for his hypocrisy to his gods and to his previous wife:

quid puer Ascanius, quid di meruere Penates?
ignibus ereptos obruet unda deos?
sed neque fers tecum, nec, quae mihi, perfide, iactas,
presserunt umeros sacra paterque tuos.
omnia mentiris; neque enim tua fallere lingua
incipit a nobis, primaque plector ego:
si quaeras ubi sit formosi mater Iuli—
occidit a duro sola relicta viro!¹⁶³

What has little Ascanius done to deserve this fate?
Snatched from the fire only to be drowned in the waves?
No, neither are you bearing them with you, false boaster;
your shoulders neither bore the sacred relics, nor your father.
You lie about *everything*, and I am not the first victim of your lies,
nor I am the first to suffer a blow from you:

¹⁶² Ovid. "Heroides VII: Dido to Aeneas." In *Ovid: Heroides and Amores*. Edited by Grant Showerman. Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), ll.19-30, p. 34.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, ll.77-86, p. 88.

Do you ever ask, where Iulus' mother is?
 She died because her unfeeling husband left her behind!

In making the remark that she is not the first that Aeneas has left behind, Dido makes it clear that she regards herself as his *second* left-behind wife, a critique that Ovid employs both here and in the *Metamorphoses* to reject Aeneas' Virgilian excuse that he had never married her. Finally, in describing the form her death will take, Dido's letter places the blame squarely on Aeneas:

scribimus, et gremio Troicus ensis adest;
 perque genas lacrimae strictum labuntur in ensem,
 qui iam pro lacrimis sanguine tinctus erit.
 quam bene conveniunt fato tua munera nostro!
 instruis impensa nostra sepulcra brevi.
 nec mea nunc primum feriuntur pectora telo:
 ille locus saevi vulnus amoris habet.¹⁶⁴

I write, and in my bosom the Trojan sword is here;
 Over my cheeks the tears run, onto the drawn sword,
 Which soon will be stained with blood rather than tears.
 How fitting is your gift in my fateful hour!
 You bring my death so cheaply.
 Nor is now the first time my heart feels a weapon's blow:
 it already bears the cruel wounds of love.

Ovid, unlike Virgil, is absolutely unconcerned with making readers sympathize with Aeneas. In fact, his concern is quite the opposite—to get them to see the betrayal of Dido as the betrayal of life as it is lived by ordinary human beings who are neither emperors, nor the epic heroes meant to justify them:

Ovid transfers Dido's story from an account of Rome's imperial origins to a collection of letters written by classical heroines lamenting erotic betrayals. A more intimate, cyclical view of history as repeated instances of male treachery replaces Virgil's portrait of it as a linear progress from Troy to Actium. From this feminine perspective, the crucial events are not the rise and fall of empires but the births, deaths, and love affairs of private individuals. By disregarding Aeneas's public accomplishments, Ovid undermines the official justification for Dido's abandonment. If Aeneas is a hero according to one account, he is a traitor according to the other.¹⁶⁵

It should come as no surprise, however, that among Ovid's critics are those who would rather sympathize with Augustus and his proxy figure Aeneas, than with Dido. Lancelot Patrick Wilkinson dismisses Dido in *Heroides* 7, and in so doing, very neatly embodies what seems a too-common condition among literary critics—the cultivated inability to respond emotionally to poetry (expect,

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., ll.184-90, p. 96.

¹⁶⁵ John Watkins. *The Specter of Dido: Spenser and Virgilian Epic*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 31.

perhaps, with the impatience of a reader no longer able to read as anything other than a kind of literary-reference-generation machine):

[T]he more Ovid tries to excel, the less he succeeds. The forced epigrams creak—Aeneas is giving both sails and promises to the wind; he is casting off his pledges and his ships together; he is forsaking what’s done to seek what’s yet to do—*facta fugis, facienda petis*. We are not really convinced when Virgil’s Dido, exaggerating a curse that had come naturally in Homer, less naturally in Catullus, raves that Aeneas was the son of a Caucasian crag, nurtured by Hyrcanian tigresses; still less, when Ovid’s Dido attributes his origin to stone and mountain-oaks, wild beasts or, better still, the sea in storm as now it is. She tries to frighten him with this storm, adding that even in calm the sea has many perils, and, as the element from which Venus sprang, is especially hostile to perjured lovers. She fears for the safety of Ascanius too, and of the Trojan Penates. So it goes on, argument after weary argument, conceit after strained conceit (to our way of thinking), for close on to two hundred lines.¹⁶⁶

Here we have a glimpse inside the mind of a reader who, despite “argument after weary argument,” is no longer able, or willing, to respond to poetry—or is else so impressed by the so-called Virgilian virtues of warfare and hierarchical obedience that he can no longer respond in any way except negatively to anything in poetry which is not immediately redolent of masculine blood and iron. Ovid was never the kind of poet that would satisfy such a vigorously testosterone-driven reader; nor was he the kind of poet an admirer of power and empire would find amenable. And such admiration can be found amply represented in the critical literature. For example, Howard Jacobson argues that “Dido’s attitude is essentially Ovid’s and that the inability to separate out his personal feelings from the mythical situation is one reason why this poem fails.”¹⁶⁷ Here a literary critic points to a poet and says that the poet’s “inability” to get beyond “personal feelings” is a reason for *poetic failure*. It is difficult to think of a more perfect illustration of the seemingly unbridgeable chasm that separates poetry and its critics.

But more than his “feelings,” for Jacobson it seems to be Ovid’s *politics* that represent his real failing: “Ovid was congenitally averse to the Vergilian world-view and quite unable to sympathize with a *Weltanschauung* that could exalt grand, abstract—not to mention divine—undertakings over simple individual, human and personal considerations.”¹⁶⁸ And here is where we encounter the absolutely stunning argument, brutal in its frank dismissal of the value of individual human life: *Ovid was wrong to the extent that he was not Virgil; he was wrong to the extent that he did not value empire over the individual heart; and so, too, are you.* For Jacobson, Heroides 7 is merely an agon, a struggle of one poet with another, “Ovid waging war against Vergil.” And Ovid, just as those who admire him, “is

¹⁶⁶ L. P. Wilkinson. *Ovid Recalled*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1955), 93.

¹⁶⁷ Howard Jacobson. *Ovid’s Heroides*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), 90.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

doomed to defeat from the start because of his incapacity and unwillingness to appreciate the Vergilian position.¹⁶⁹ Note the weasel word, *appreciate*. Not understand and reject—no, there is no room for that in this reading. Ovid failed, as do readers for whom Ovid's treatment of Dido is more appealing than Virgil's, because of a failure to agree with and align with the *obvious rightness* of the imperial, the “grand, abstract [and] divine,” rather than the “individual, human and personal.” The sound of marching feet is just audible in the distance as Jacobson's argument reaches its conclusion.

But even critics not quite so imperially inclined seem to find reason to dismiss Ovid's Dido: “Compared with Virgil's Dido, Ovid's Dido (in *Heroides* 7) is a simplification. A mere victim, she is sad, but somehow not tragic—not tragic because not strong. We pity her more and care about her less.”¹⁷⁰ For such critics, it seems that compared with the martial glories of Virgil's Aeneas, and even the rage of Virgil's Dido, the quiet, sad, but ultimately not-to-be-deceived understanding of Ovid's Dido offers too little in the way of excitement or what is mistaken for strength. But Ovid's Dido is stronger, much stronger than Virgil's, for she sees what Aeneas really is (and by extension, what Rome and its servants really are, what any empire and its servants, even its academic servants, really are). As Linda Kaufman notes, scholars who “compare Ovid unfavorably to Virgil” are missing a crucial point, since the “difference between Virgil's Dido and Ovid's illuminates the differences in style and politics between epic and epistle. [...] In Ovid, national glory is irrelevant [...].”¹⁷¹ All-too-many (primarily male) literary critics condescendingly dismiss her in the fashion of W.S. Anderson, who writes of what he calls “a contrast between a *heroic* and a *charming* Dido,”¹⁷² and then goes on to rather back-handedly credit Ovid for freeing Dido “from the grandeur and majesty Virgil sought” while giving her “arguments [that] tend to produce an impression of a charming, even coquettish woman of passion”¹⁷³—if you listen carefully there, you can hear the *tsk tsk* being delivered along with a pat on the head. But as so often, the critic says more about himself here than about the poet or the poem. Perhaps it is ever thus.

For Ovid, and for many of his readers, “[y]ou cannot leave Dido behind. She will not oblige by sacrificing the private life, the life of feelings, to the greater glory of Rome.”¹⁷⁴ And yet, from the point of view of practical political considerations, perhaps Ovid should have left her behind. Perhaps the poet erred in writing his Dido as he did. In all likelihood, it was at least partly Ovid's own poetry, perhaps even his letter from Dido to Aeneas, which got him in trouble

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ David Scott Wilson-Okamura. *Virgil in the Renaissance*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 234.

¹⁷¹ Linda S. Kauffman. *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions*. (Ithaca: NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 48.

¹⁷² W.S. Anderson. “The *Heroides*.” In *Ovid*. Edited by J.W. Binns. (London: Routledge, 1973), 60.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁷⁴ Lanham, 63.

with the imperial dictator. As Jacobson observes, “I. K. Horváth [...] argues that Ovid’s version of an *impius* Aeneas predisposed Augustus against him and the *Arx*, [and that his poetic portrayal of Aeneas] was, as it were, the straw that broke the camel’s back.”¹⁷⁵ Horváth himself notes that it is important “to take a closer look at *Heroides* 7, the so-called Dido-letter, which was, in our opinion, written largely to offend and annoy Augustus, and is usually dismissed with the simple statement that in Ovid, ‘Pius’ Aeneas is a ‘worthless liar.’”¹⁷⁶

If it is true, as Horváth seems to suggest, that Ovid was taking a deliberate poke at Augustus, and at the “heroic” Virgilian myth of Aeneas and the founding of Imperial Rome, by writing from the point of view of a betrayed and abandoned Carthaginian queen, then we have in “Dido to Aeneas” one of the finest examples in all of world history of love and its poetry standing up to power and saying “No.” In giving Aeneas no reply to Dido’s words, the poet of love, as opposed to imperial piety, throws his weight behind Dido. And so, despite the critics, have countless readers and poets since.

V

Responses to and Rewritings of Aeneas and Dido: Marlowe

One such reader and poet is the Elizabethan playwright, Christopher Marlowe. Marlowe is notably Ovidian in his sympathies, as were many “medieval and early modern readers [who] more frequently savored the romantic, erotic Dido episode over other parts of the *Aeneid* and considered its hero remarkably unchivalrous for choosing *patria* over *amor*.”¹⁷⁷ Timothy D. Crowley argues that Marlowe’s play “consistently critiques the *Aeneid* and deploys Ovid for its unique parody of Vergil,” going on to assert that “[f]rom start to finish, Marlowe’s play questions the epic poem’s central premise by recasting Vergil’s famous rhetoric about Aeneas and his destiny in ways that undercut its gravity and persuasiveness.”¹⁷⁸ In his *The Tragedie of Dido, Queene of Carthage* (likely premiered in 1593, and printed in a quarto edition in 1594, with Thomas Nashe listed as a co-author), Marlowe paints a picture of a delusional (if grief-stricken) widower

¹⁷⁵ Jacobson, 90, n.26.

¹⁷⁶ “den VII. Gesang der Heroides näher ins Auge zu fassen, den sogenannten Dido-Brief, der unserer Überzeugung nach in hohem Masse dazu angetan war, bei Augustus Anstoss und Ärgeris zu erregen, und der zumeist mit der einfachen Feststellung dessen abgetan wird, dass aus dem «pius» Aeneas bei Ovid ein «nichtswürdiger Eidbrüchiger» wird” (I.K. Horvath. “Impius Aeneas.” *Acta Antiqua: Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*. Edited by A. Dobrovits, J. Harmatta, and GY. Moravcsik. Book 6, Vols. 3-4, [1958], 390).

¹⁷⁷ M.L. Stapleton. *Marlowe’s Ovid: The Elegies in the Marlowe Canon*. (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2014), 84.

¹⁷⁸ Timothy D. Crowley. “Arms and the Boy: Marlowe’s Aeneas and the Parody of Imitation in *Dido, Queen of Carthage*.” *English Literary Renaissance*, 38 (2008), 410.