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DIDO, AENEAS, AND THE CONCEPT OF *PIETAS*

By KENNETH McLEISH

VARIOUS attempts have been made, over the years, to assess the character of Dido, and explain her presence in, and extraordinary influence on, the *Aeneid.* Some critics have seen her as the heroine of an Aristotelian tragedy; others believe that Virgil emulated Pygmalion, and fell in love with his own creation; the most perverse of all call her a digression, a fatal flaw in the construction of the poem, and one which irretrievably weakens our view of Aeneas himself.

But Virgil was far too accomplished a craftsman to make blunders of that sort. It is as ludicrous to assume that he was carried away, and ruined the shape of his work from inadvertence or incompetence, as it is to say that the Porter in *Macbeth* or the handkerchief scene in *Othello*[1] are excrescences that Shakespeare would have regretted if he had lived in a more self-critical age.

Dido is there because Virgil—a great poet, a consummate craftsman—wanted her there. Everything she says or does is part of the design, and her presence in the *Aeneid* must deepen our understanding, not lessen it. The contrary view, that she is the centre of some tongue-in-cheek anti-epic, a satire by Virgil against Augustus, simply collapses in the face of the *Aeneid* itself, a masterpiece full of the highest poetic inspiration, and with an inner logic, an adherence to its own artistic truth, that lift it high outside the realms of 'debunking' literature.

The oldest, simplest view of Dido seems to be the best: poetry apart, she is in the *Aeneid* principally to emphasize Aeneas' *pietas.* Books iv, v, and vi deal with different aspects of *pietas*, which is closely linked every time it appears with Aeneas' destiny, and the progression through Roman history to Augustus himself. The *pietas* in Books v and vi is easy to see; but in Book iv it is obscured—some say obliterated—by the character of Dido.

In parenthesis, it is worth considering this 'character'. To us Dido is a three-dimensional character, a real person whose emotions and actions have a roundness, a wholeness, that often seems missing in Aeneas himself. But we are post-Romantics: our view of Dido is filtered through Purcell, Dryden, Berlioz, and a hundred other interpreters. To a Roman of Virgil's day she was probably nothing more than an

[1] Criticized as melodramatic by Shaw in *Plays and Players.*

unbalanced barbarian queen, a definite encumbrance in Aeneas' way. Virgil's avowed purpose in undertaking the *Aeneid* was to present Aeneas as the founder of the Roman race and precursor of Augustus. He is far more important than any of the obstacles placed in his path. In such a context (and again, leaving poetry aside) Dido might seem to have no larger a part to play than Scylla, Charybdis, or Polyphemus himself.

Except, of course, for *pietas*, the theme that runs through her whole relationship with Aeneas. Of the other qualities of a Roman hero, Aeneas' *gravitas* and *dignitas*, his private and public integrity, suffer severe blows[1] in the course of the work; only his *virtus* (particularly in Books ii and ix–xii) and *pietas* remain intact, and in the end make it possible for him to reach his destination and found his city. (And *virtus*, whenever it appears, is closely linked to *pietas*—consider for example his stirring words to his followers during the sack of Troy (ii. 348–54), or more interestingly the very end of the *Aeneid*, where it is only *pietas* for the dead Pallas that can bring Aeneas, after so many brave and heroic deeds, finally to kill Turnus and fulfil his destiny (xii. 938–52).)

Even before Aeneas meets Dido in Book i, his *pietas* is heavily emphasized. He is *insignem pietate virum* (i. 10); when he weeps for the friends he thinks drowned (i. 220 ff.), stays awake planning for the future (i. 305), or introduces himself to his own mother (i. 378), he is described as *pius Aeneas*. His tears when he sees the decorations of Dido's temple (i. 456 ff.) could be instanced as a sign of his humanity, and his concern for his dead comrades and living followers. But, interestingly, when he first tells *Dido* his name, the description is purely factual (i. 595–6):

> adsum,
> Troius Aeneas, Libycis abreptus ab undis—

a marked contrast with Ilioneus' earlier words to the queen (i. 544–5):

> rex erat Aeneas nobis, quo iustior alter
> nec pietate fuit, nec bello maior et armis.

Dido's first appearance contrasts strongly with that of Aeneas. To Aeneas himself she seems enviable simply because her kingdom is sure and established (i. 437); but to us, the readers, she is first presented in a scene of remarkable splendour, closely foreshadowing her entrance for the hunt in Book iv:[2]

[1] Cf. his behaviour in the storm (i. 92 ff.); his inner torment after the ships are burnt (v. 700 ff.), or the gross indignities (disobedience by his men, wounding) he suffers before the final conflict (xii. 311 ff.).

[2] See below for comment on how this passage differs from its near-twin in iv. 141–50. Both Dido and Aeneas are presented to us as god-like beings—with the single absence of *pietas* to distinguish her from him. (One might also note that they are not only

haec dum Dardanio Aeneae miranda videntur,
dum stupet obtutuque haeret defixus in uno,
regina ad templum, forma pulcherrima Dido,
incessit magna iuvenum stipante caterva.
qualis in Eurotae ripis aut per iuga Cynthi
exercet Diana choros, quam mille secutae
hinc atque hinc glomerantur Oreades; illa pharetram
fert umero gradiensque deas supereminet omnes
(Latonae tacitum pertemptant gaudia pectus):
talis erat Dido, talem se laeta ferebat
per medios instans operi regnisque futuris.
tum foribus divae, media testudine templi,
saepta armis solioque alte subnixa resedit.
iura dabat legesque viris, operumque laborem
partibus aequabat iustis aut sorte trahebat. (i. 494–508)

The simile here contrasts with the similes used later, when Aeneas casts off the cloud of invisibility and is first revealed to Dido (i. 586–93). Dido is compared to a goddess striding along in the midst of her excited followers; the emphasis is on bustle and movement; Aeneas on the other hand is given no attributes but handsomeness, a singularly static quality. When we compare this with the 'personal' similes in Book iv (see below), and particularly with iv. 141–50, where Aeneas/Apollo stands apart from barbaric bustle and movement, the pattern of Virgil's thought becomes clear.

The relationship between Dido and Aeneas in the rest of Book i is largely formal—but even so the seeds of future destruction are carefully sown: cf. i. 613, Dido's first sight of Aeneas; i. 631–42, the banqueting-scene; the drinking of toasts in i. 734–40, picked up so superbly in i. 749. In fact, by the end of Book i, perhaps even before the gods plant the seeds of love in Dido's heart, she is shown as (*a*) un-Roman and (*b*) untouched by or oblivious to the very qualities in Aeneas that make him a 'Roman' hero. Aeneas on the other hand is presented with some care as a man of destiny, not unacquainted with grief, but above all solicitous for his followers and the will of the gods.

Books ii and iii are concerned with Aeneas' narration of the Fall of Troy: there is *pietas* here, and *virtus* in plenty; but the only point we need mention is the introduction to his speech (ii. 1–2), where he is conventionally described as *pater Aeneas*, and the very pointed repetition of the same phrase (coloured by all that has gone between) in the lines describing the end of his narration (iii. 716–18).

If the poem is read aloud, and only a small pause is made between

god-like, but god-dominated as well. In Book iv Aeneas is described as *certus eundi* [554], whereas Dido is *certa mori* [564]. Their destinies are set out for them, whatever their characters or actions.)

Books iii and iv, the contrast between Aeneas and Dido is immediately obvious, the contrast that occupied Virgil for the greater part of Book iv. Aeneas is calm, quiet, and decisive:

> sic pater Aeneas intentis omnibus unus
> fata renarrabat divum cursusque docebat.
> conticuit tandem factoque hic fine quievit. (iii. 716–18)

Dido, on the other hand, is already in deep distress:

> at regina gravi iamdudum saucia cura
> vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni. (iv. 1–2)

Thus, at the very start of Book iv, all we know of the relationship between Dido and Aeneas is that she is wildly and fatally in love, impulsive and romantic, whereas he is detached and unconcerned, his mind more on the past and future than on the present. Dido's *pietas* (so far) consists solely in welcoming the Trojans instead of destroying them; Aeneas', on the other hand, has been revealed often and in many different ways.

This is the fatal difference, and it is pointed up still further in the opening dialogue of Book iv, where Dido seriously discusses with her sister whether or not to abandon the *pietas* she owes her dead husband Sychaeus. At first she is adamant:

> si mihi non animo fixum immotumque sederet
> ne cui me vinclo vellem sociare iugali,
> postquam prius amor deceptam morte fefellit;
> si non pertaesum thalami taedaeque fuisset,
> huic uni forsan potui succumbere culpae . . . (iv. 15–19)

> ille meos, primus qui me sibi iunxit, amores
> abstulit; ille habeat secum servetque sepulchro. (iv. 28–9)

But Anna's practical advice, and the 'love that eats at her heart and gives her no rest', weaken this resolve, so that she asks the gods to settle the matter. This in itself is an act of *pietas*, and it might be argued that the gods' negative answer, suggested in Virgil's comments in iv. 65–7:

> heu, vatum ignarae mentes! quid vota furentem,
> quid delubra iuvant? est mollis flamma medullas
> interea et tacitum vivit sub pectore vulnus,

makes her a tragic figure, in the Aristotelian or indeed any other sense. Dido is doomed, and her helplessness is stressed by the first of the five 'personal' similes[1] in this book (iv. 68–73): she is like a deer wandering the woods, not knowing that she has a poisoned arrow in her side. Her behaviour in this whole passage (iv. 68–89) is already that of an

[1] The 'ant-simile' (iv. 402 ff.) is not strictly relevant to our purpose, as it is concerned more with the external appearance of movement than with inner emotion.

unbalanced, doomed woman. In no more than 80 lines her *pietas* to Sychaeus has begun to weaken, and already her actions are becoming paranormal. The point is not laboured, but it is clearly made.

There follows a brief interlude (the conversation between Juno and Venus), and then come two of the most powerful and significant passages in the whole book. The first concerns Dido:

> Oceanum interea surgens Aurora reliquit.
> it portis iubare exorto delecta iuventus,
> retia rara, plagae, lato venabula ferro,
> Massylique ruunt equites et odora canum vis.
> reginam thalamo cunctantem ad limina primi
> Poenorum exspectant, ostroque insignis et auro
> stat sonipes ac frena ferox spumantia mandit.
> tandem progreditur magna stipante caterva
> Sidoniam picto chlamydem circumdata limbo;
> cui pharetra ex auro, crines nodantur in aurum,
> aurea purpuream subnectit fibula vestem. (iv. 129–39)

The main impression here is of opulence, colour, and a quite un-Roman kind of splendour. Dido is at the centre of the scene—in fact, by delaying, she is the very cause of its existence. But it is contrasted immediately with the second simile, that comparing Aeneas to Apollo:

> ipse ante alios pulcherrimus omnes
> infert se socium Aeneas atque agmina iungit.
> qualis ubi hibernam Lyciam Xanthique fluenta
> deserit ac Delum maternam invisit Apollo
> instauratque choros, mixtique altaria circum
> Cretesque Dryopesque fremunt, pictique Agathyrsi:
> ipse iugis Cynthi graditur mollique fluentem
> fronde premit crinem fingens atque implicat auro,
> tela sonant umeris: haud illo segnior ibat
> Aeneas, tantum egregio decus enitet ore. (iv. 141–50)

Here, although the simile is superficially like that in i. 437 ff., the god keeps aloof from his exotic and barbarian followers; the simile *is* chiefly concerned with his handsomeness, but at the same time, and unlike Diana, he chooses to leave his worshippers and walk alone.[1]

After this events move swiftly: the hunt, the storm, the marriage, Rumour, the delivery of Jupiter's warning to Aeneas, and Aeneas' immediate decision to leave Carthage—all happen in the space of 135 lines. In passing we may notice that it is *pietas* that is urged on Aeneas: *pietas* to the will of the gods, to his followers, and above all to Iulus,

[1] This simile is also reminiscent of ii. 304–8, where Aeneas compares himself to a lone shepherd on a hill top, watching flames or a flood engulf the farmlands below. The imagery is once again metaphorically significant.

the eventual founder of Augustus' line (iv. 227–38, 267–76); and Aeneas' reactions show *pietas* both to his followers (iv. 281, 288–91), and to his own relationship with Dido (iv. 291–4).

Immediately after this passage—where Aeneas' obedience to the gods makes him move with an almost ludicrous haste—the third simile is placed (iv. 300–4). Dido is compared to a Bacchant, that is to say to a woman in the grip of a frenzy from which release is still possible. By the time of her next simile (iv. 469–73) this possibility is gone—she is like mad Orestes, or Pentheus on the stage.

Now comes the central part of the book, the section some critics regard as the tragic *peripateia*. It is here, if anywhere, that the crucial point must be made, if Dido's presence in the *Aeneid* is to be justified on purely logical grounds. It is here above all that her ever-increasing madness must be contrasted with Aeneas' *pietas*—and contrasted in such a way that the reader is left in no doubt where his sympathies should lie.[1]

Virgil—as many writers have noted—composed this section with great care. It consists of just under 300 lines, and ends with the Trojans' departure (iv. 583). In it are embedded three personal similes, and two conversations framing three 'solo' speeches from Dido. The form is that of an arch, and its keystone is the refusal of Aeneas to give way (iv. 437 ff.) and Dido's consequent decision to commit suicide (iv. 450 ff.).

Let us first examine the similes. They occur, as always, at the crucial points of the narrative. There are three, two involving Dido, and one—the central one in the book—describing Aeneas. In iv. 301–4 Dido is compared to a Bacchant (see above); in iv. 441–9 Aeneas is compared to an oak; and finally, in iv. 469–73 Dido is compared to two notorious stage madmen, both punished by the gods and hounded by the Furies. When these similes are set against the earlier pair (iv. 68–73 Dido = deer; iv. 141–50 Aeneas = Apollo), the progression in Virgil's mind is obvious. Just as Dido was doomed from the start, and her decline into madness and suicide is logical and foreordained, so Aeneas' reactions from the beginning are single-minded, and follow the pattern laid down for *him* by destiny.

When we move from similes to speeches, the immediate point of interest is the symmetry with which they are grouped. None the less, the effect is not of an ordered, formal debate, where each side states its

[1] It is here too that the great critical dilemma occurs. Book iv is poetically very fine, and Dido emerges from it as a real person, perhaps more sympathetic even than Aeneas himself. How much Virgil's head was at odds with his heart, has been the subject of speculation for centuries. The present article argues that in one respect at least his head remained fully in control. At the same time, the whole treatment of Dido and Aeneas in this book shows a depth of human understanding that makes nonsense of the black-and-white judgements critics are so often compelled to make.

case with exactly equal weight. Virgil avoids this by grouping his speeches in threes, not twos. A chart can be made thus:

9–29 Dido; 31–53 Anna.
94–104 Juno; 107–14 Venus; 115–27 Juno.
204–18 Iarbas; 222–37 Jupiter; 265–76 Mercury.
305–30 Dido; 333–61 Aeneas; 365–87 Dido.
416–36 Dido; 477–98 Dido; 534–52 Dido.
560–70 Mercury; 573–9 Aeneas; 590–629 Dido.
634–40 Dido; 651–8 Dido; 659–62 Dido.
675–85 Anna; 702–3 Iris.

It is immediately clear that Dido has far more to say than Aeneas. His last words to her occur as early as iv. 361—'Italiam non sponte sequor' —and contrast most interestingly with his last words of all, which are a prayer to Mercury to guide the Trojans safely on their way. This prayer, with its implication that the gods' will has been accepted, itself contrasts with *Dido*'s last words (iv. 660 ff.), a curse on Aeneas, the violent expression of a mind overborne beyond redemption.

In fact one can trace in the speeches given to the two main characters Virgil's whole purpose. Aeneas has no need of length; Dido has, and protests too much. Once again our historical perspective is distorting: we pity Dido's predicament, and are moved by her grief until we overlook the violent, unbalanced nature of most of her utterances. Aeneas, on the other hand, because he says little, seems cold and unsympathetic. But the Romans—and the Augustans in particular—prized moderation; to them Dido's behaviour must have seemed excessive and overdramatic—not for nothing is she compared, at the height of her madness, to stage characters. The world of Senecan melodrama is not far away.

Aeneas speaks only twice in Book iv, if we discount the commands given indirectly in iv. 288–94. His first speech (iv. 333–61) is a measured answer to Dido's first impassioned attack. Her words end with *dixerat* (iv. 331), the pluperfect of finality, used of Jupiter in iv. 238 and after Dido's last words on earth (iv. 663). In other words, no answer is expected; but nevertheless Aeneas gives one. In it, although he speaks with affection of Dido, he specifically denies that he entered into any marriage (iv. 339)—an alliance which would have involved the claims of *pietas*. He then turns to matters in which his *pietas is* involved: Troy and his dead friends' memory; Italy, the goal ordained for him by Jupiter; his father's ghost and the son he is cheating of his destiny; and finally, clear orders sent from Jupiter himself. *These* are the things that motivate Aeneas, and the things Virgil's audience would understand. Compared to them, all Dido's reproaches are no more than *querelae* (iv. 360), irrelevant hysteria remote from the realities of life.

Then there are the last words of his speech, his last words to Dido:

'Italiam non sponte sequor' (iv. 361). How much they reveal of his emotion, and his *pietas*! His pursuit of Italy has become a burden, largely because of his love for Dido, but it is still a sacred duty which he cannot and will not abandon. This is hammered home in iv. 393 ff., after Dido's violent answer to him. He longs to comfort her, but despite his anguish he obeys the gods' orders and goes back to his people. And here—as the book approaches its climax, the keystone of its arch, the oak-tree simile (iv. 441–9)—is the only place in Book iv where Aeneas is actually given the adjective *pius* (iv. 393). The whole point of Book iv is there, emphatically and clearly made.

Aeneas' second speech comes after an interesting passage involving sleep. In iv. 522 ff. everything in the world is asleep—except Dido. She is filling the air with *questus* (iv. 553; cf. *querelae* above). But Aeneas *is* asleep; his mind is made up (*certus eundi*, iv. 554), he is enjoying his rest (iv. 555) not because he is callous or indifferent to Dido, but because his *pietas* has carried him through, and he is filled with the serenity of a man at peace with fate. So, when Mercury awakes him, it is not this time to remind him of his duty, but simply to point out the Trojans' danger and the need for haste. At once Aeneas moves with the swiftness one would expect from such a leader: the crew are at the oars, the anchor-rope cut, and the ritual prayer for fair wind said and done with, all in the space of 9 lines. Aeneas' inner conflict is over and won; like an oak, his *pietas* has been battered by the winds of conflicting emotions, and shaken to its roots, but has emerged all the stronger from its ordeal.

For Dido, on the other hand, her initial act of *impietas* against Sychaeus can only end in madness and death. As she herself says:

> infelix Dido, nunc te facta *impia* tangunt?
> tum decuit, cum sceptra dabas. (iv. 596–7)

The speech containing these lines is a violent vengeance-aria, culminating in the prophecy of Hannibal arising from her ashes—but it contains many signs of madness, and more than a touch of theatricality. Medea's soliloquies come to mind, at iv. 595, iv. 600–3, and above all in the invocation to Hecate and the other gods (iv. 607–12).

At the very end, however, Dido does recover a little sanity: her final speech on the funeral-pyre—apart from its closing words—is both dignified and full of real pathos. There is—at last!—some queenly *dignitas* in iv. 653 and iv. 655 ff. This is the royal Dido glimpsed briefly in Book i, before she met Aeneas. Her death, like her reign, was noble: it is right that the Funeral Games in Book v (in fact an act of *pietas* by Aeneas to his father) should seem *emotionally* to be held in her honour.

Aeneas' relationship with Dido, then, preserves a symmetrical and

logical pattern from its beginning in Book i to its beautiful 'dying-fall' ending in Book vi (lines 450–71). Both characters are rounded and three-dimensional; both preserve their integrity as creations of the mind, their unity of motive, feeling, and action. And, most importantly, the *pietas* which is the key to the character of *Virgil's* Aeneas (as distinct from anyone else's) is expounded, strengthened, and developed, through his *affaire* with Dido, in a way that commands our great respect for his creator's mind. Virgil took a risk, but it was a calculated risk, and it came off brilliantly.

VERSION

From *Oedipus at Colonus* (verses 607–15)

ὦ φίλτατ' Αἰγέως παῖ, μόνοις οὐ γίγνεται
θεοῖσι γῆρας οὐδὲ κατθανεῖν ποτε.
τὰ δ' ἄλλα συγχεῖ πάνθ' ὁ παγκρατὴς χρόνος.
φθίνει μὲν ἰσχὺς γῆς, φθίνει δὲ σώματος,
θνήσκει δὲ πίστις, βλαστάνει δ' ἀπιστία,
καὶ πνεῦμα ταὐτὸν οὔποτ' οὔτ' ἐν ἀνδράσιν
φίλοις βέβηκεν οὔτε πρὸς πόλιν πόλει.
τοῖς μὲν γὰρ ἤδη, τοῖς δ' ἐν ὑστέρῳ χρόνῳ
τὰ τερπνὰ πικρὰ γίγνεται καὖθις φίλα. SOPHOCLES

Fortuna saevo laeta negotio

non umquam superos minuit damnosa senectus,
nec Libitina rapit;
quidquid ubique viget, quidquid natura creavit,
temporis ira domat.
corporis humani, Torquate, potentia terrae,
interitura cadit;
deperit incorrupta Fides et pinguia florent
semina Perfidiae;
foedus amicitiae non fulget honoribus isdem,
nec nitet urbis honor.
dulcia transmutat Fors et transmutat acerba,
reddit amicitiam. L. W. DE SILVA