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TAINTED BY DECEPTION: READING VIRGIL'S DIDO IN LIGHT OF OVID'S DIDO¹

ABSTRACT. Wesołowska Elżbieta, *Tainted by Deception: Reading Virgil's Dido in Light of Ovid's Dido*.

The paper aims to reveal some aspects of deception and falsity in Virgil and Ovid's famous portrayals of an unhappy Dido. Paradoxically, such a view helps us to understand not only the sophisticated game between the younger and older poet, but also the special tension existing in the structure of the image of Dido, Queen of Carthage, deceived or only abandoned by the Roman hero Aeneas.

Keywords: Dido; Aeneas; mission; obedience; love; deception; truth; nightmare; Punicus; Poenus; Carthage

As it is customary to discuss an adaptation in relation to the original story, this title may strike one as slightly provocative. In this article, I will consider the similarities and differences between Ovid's and Virgil's accounts of the tragic story of Dido², and in my approach, I consider these versions as equivalent to each other, thus refusing to acknowledge the adaptation of the story by the younger poet as being secondary to its celebrated predecessor. The choice of Dido as the subject of the following analysis was partly inspired by the fact that Radosław Piętka decided not to mention this character in his illuminating study on Roman mythology, which the author in question refers to as 'urban'. To be more precise, her name is mentioned once in relation to her less widely known sister Anna, and her family history. Although Piętka is justified in not referring at length to Dido in his study, in my analysis of the Queen of Carthage, I focus not so much on the question of her presence or lack thereof in the literary tradition, characteristic of the feminist approach³, as on the complexity of the character and her problematic

¹ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer of my paper for her/his valuable remarks, which have improved my text.

² As Sapota (2016) wrote, there is nothing special in that her tragic fates often formed the basis of the plot of tragedies and operas. Moreover, we have the attempts to search for comical elements in *Aeneid* (see Piętka 2019).

³ For example, the dissertation written by De Boer (2016).

role in relation to the legend of the pious protoplast of the Romans, Aeneas. It could be argued that the betrayed queen acts as the counterpart of Remus, whose death at the hand of his brother the Romans did not fail to account for.⁴ Although Aeneas is not guilty of homicide or, worse still, fratricide (after all, leaving a woman in love to embark on a divine mission to found the greatest empire in the world, as commanded by the gods, counts as a lesser crime), his reputation as *pious Aeneas* is tarnished by his somewhat pusillanimous abandonment of a devoted woman, who offered him hospitality and was keen to share her kingdom with him. It should also be noted that ethnic differences may have precipitated Aeneas' resolution to abandon the Phoenician woman, given that her nation was traditionally seen by the Romans as treacherous and deceitful.⁵ I will revisit this issue later in the article. Let us simply note here that in Virgil's epic, the caring mother of Aeneas, the goddess Venus, takes preventive action against what she sees as the perfidy of the Phoenicians. For this purpose, she perpetrates a hoax in which she replaces Ascanius, the infant son of Aeneas, with Amor to make the queen fond of the newcomer, which Venus sees as the best guarantee of safety, both for him and his companions (I 657–661).

At Cytherea novas artes, nova pectore versat
 Consilia, ut faciem mutatus et ora Cupido
 pro dulci Ascanio veniat, donisque furente
 incendat reginam, atque ossibus implicet ignem;
 quippe **domum timet ambiguum Tyriosque bilinguis**;

But Cytherea in her heart revolved
 new wiles, new schemes: how Cupid should transform
 his countenance, and, coming in the guise
 of sweet Ascanius, still more inflame
 the amorous Queen with gifts and deeply fuse
 through all her yielding frame his fatal fire.
 Sooth, Venus feared the many-languaged guile
 which Tyrians use;
 (trans. Theodore C. Williams)

Before I discuss both versions of the story of Dido from the Augustan age, I should stress that this tragic story found its way into early Roman literary works.

⁴For further information on the representations of this scene as well as attempts to censor it, see Piętka 2015: 67–70. For more about various aspects of lies in Roman literature, see Schade 2014.

⁵Consider the common Latin phrases: “perfidia Poena” and “perfidia Punica” (Franko 1994). Another nation that was stereotypically branded as deceitful in the ancient world were the Cretans (see Kaczyńska 2000). Kaczyńska notices an interesting socio-literary phenomenon, namely that Homer's Odysseus resorts to Cretan masks when referring to his own disguised identity. Does it follow from this that the Greek hero makes this cultural reference in order to question self-reflexively his honesty?

Pompey Trogus, Varro and Livy were among those writers who took a keen interest in the story. The unhappy Dido was also lamented by the followers of the great Virgil⁶. Notable among these writers were not only Silius Italicus, the late classical commentator of Donatus,⁷ and Ovid⁸, but for example also much later Dante, Milton, and composer Purcell (1689).⁹

Heroides VII is not Ovid's only poetic foray into this terrain. Scholars have long ago noticed in Book XIV of *Metamorphoses* (XIV 1–120) a curious epyllion – commonly referred to as the ‘Little *Aeneid*’ – that alludes to this tragic story. Let us take a closer look at the following passage to see if it indeed makes a “disgraceful mockery of the original,” as some seasoned scholars are inclined to believe.¹⁰ Consider the important polyptoton¹¹ in the last verse of the following passage (XIV 78–81):

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

In my reading of it, in this passage the poet acknowledges the complexity of the position of a woman who, before she takes her own life, following her lover's betrayal, must first deceive her loving sister, who would try to prevent her from doing so. Whether this scene should be read as a bitter allusion to the apparent dishonesty of the Carthaginians or an instance of black humour is debatable, however.¹²

⁶We should add here (after Ogle 1924) the very negative opinion expressed by Fowler (1920: 190) concerning Dido as a person in Virgil that the ancient author “drew a woman whose real nature was that of Medea, of Clodia, of Cleopatra; women whose nature was utterly incompatible with all Roman ideals of family and social life.” And as Knapp (1924) added: “Virgil meant to condemn Dido wholly”. Can we really agree with the latter scholar's statement that Horace's feelings towards Cleopatra (*C.* I 37) will help us to understand Virgil's feelings towards Dido?

⁷Perhaps it is in the works of this author that we discern the symptoms of a certain (political?) discomfort when he persuades his son that Aeneas is a great man of virtue, an attempt that is curiously emphatic.

⁸For more information on the vast “Dido” tradition, see Sapota 2016. The author offers an in-depth analysis of the various versions of the myth, in which either Dido or her sister Anna commits suicide. Virgil, guided by both poetic and patriotic intuition (for want of a better phrase), chose the queen herself as the victim, rightly believing that Anna was too insignificant a figure for her death to have an appropriate meaning in this monumental – also in political terms – story (Sapota 2016).

⁹The libretto written by Nahum Tate had many innovations as compared with Virgil, Dante and Milton. See more: Ruiz Andikoetxea 2020.

¹⁰Zarzycka-Stańczak 2002: 24.

¹¹*Her.* VII 61–62: **Perdita ne perdam**, timeo, **noceamve nocenti**
neu bibat aequoreas naufragus hostis aquas.

¹²As argued by Peek 2001.

In the monumental semi-self-apologetic elegy addressed to Augustus, *Tristia* Book II, the exiled poet attempts to show that he is not the only one to write love poetry. After all, even the great Virgil, a confidant of Augustus,¹³ did not shy away from subjects of this sort. One of the passages of this book features a joke containing a quotation from the famous “*arma virumque*”, in which the great poet writes his epic in Dido’s bed (II 534): *Contulit in Tyrios arma virumque toros*. This scene relies on a certain simplification of Aeneas as the poet, which is both ambiguous and frivolous, especially if the reader recalls the well-known literary topos of love as a fight.¹⁴ As regards the theme of lying as it appears in both versions of the Dido story, the false account of the events is registered in the Roman epic in the flashbacks preceding the meeting of Aeneas and Dido. Let us list them as follows:

1. The spectre of Hector: the veracity of his prophecy and command.
2. Synon’s lie to the Trojan guards: intended to convince them to pull the horse into the city.
3. The night: facilitating deception or delusion, the disguise of desperate Trojans as Achaeans leading up to slaughter¹⁵ (II 412–413):

oriturque miserrima caedes
armorum facie et Graiarum errore iubarum.

Aeneas also recounts how, after the death of his son Polites at the hand of Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, Priam challenges his son’s murderer with the following words (II...), “at non ille, **satum quo te mentiris**, Achilles”, thus accusing him of falsely styling himself the son of the great Achilles.

After Creusa is lost in the confusion of battle, the aggrieved and helpless Aeneas (possibly no longer in control of his actions) reacts as if he were accusing his wife of having failed her husband and son¹⁶ (II 743–744):

hic demum collectis omnibus una
defuit, et comites **natumque virumque** fefellit.

¹³ He was ironically referred to as “tuus Vergilius”.

¹⁴ See the well-known verses from *Amores* I 9, 1-4:

Militat omnis amans, et habet sua castra Cupido;
Attice, crede mihi, militat omnis amans.
quae bello est habilis, Veneri quoque convenit aetas.
turpe senex miles, turpe senilis amor.

¹⁵ See Wesołowska 2012.

¹⁶ My seminar speech given to students some years ago provoked a heated discussion about whether Aeneas’ response, following the tragic death of his wife, indicates his callousness and selfishness, or whether his strange words reflect his confused reaction to the desperate situation. These mixed and conflicting responses of the audience attest to the complexity of this issue.

When Dido takes her own life, Anna, devastated by this desperate act, cries out in anguish and utter helplessness (IV 675): „hoc illud, germana, fuit? me **fraude** petebas?”

Anna feels deceived by her sister. Little did she know that when she had helped Dido build the funeral pyre – convinced that her older sister intended to make an offering to her husband, who had died years previously – she had inadvertently assisted her in her suicide. Ovid subtly alludes to this aspect of the double deception years later in his so called ‘Little *Aeneid*’ (*Met.* XIV 78–81)¹⁷.

Aeneas’ elaborate tale related at Dido’s court is full of references to falsehood, delusion and deception. It should be noted that when Dido instructs her guest to tell a story (at first, she only asks Aeneas to relate his adventures), as if without recalling the ultimate story of deception, namely that of the Trojan Horse, the tale was to lose its dramatic potential. But suddenly (II 751–752):

‘Immo age, et a prima dic, hospes, origine nobis
insidias,’ inquit, ‘Danaum, casusque tuorum,

Could she, poor thing, have expected that these deceptions would affect her as well...?¹⁸

Upon her lover’s departure, her speech turns abruptly to him and becomes imbued with synonyms of lying and deception (*Aen.* IV 296–297):

et regina **dolos** (quis **fallere** possit amantem?)
praesensit, motusque excepit prima futuros

and 305–306:

dissimulare etiam sperasti, **perfide**, tantum
posse **nefas** tacitusque mea decedere terra?

Dido’s final dialogue with Aeneas is replete with the former’s vehement reproaches against her lover. Perhaps, for this reason, it makes little sense to look for references to Aeneas, let alone reproaches against him, in Dido’s final monologue, delivered before her death. After all, she had already levelled her accusations of dishonesty and betrayal at him in their previous exchange. Although Dido does not reproach him for his betrayal and deception, she nevertheless wants him to carry the weight of moral responsibility for her death. Although the Phoenician queen’s curse is addressed to the gods, it is Aeneas who is supposed to bear the brunt of it (IV 660–662):

¹⁷ See above p. 57.

¹⁸ Can we see then Aeneas as a counterpart of the strange monster (as a Trojan horse), which brings disaster to the place where was invited?

sic, sic iuvat ire sub umbras.
 hauriat hunc oculis ignem crudelis ab alto
 Dardanus, et nostrae secum ferat omina mortis.

Could it be that Virgil's Dido was aware of being seduced by the words because she had asked for the story herself? The lack of communication between the lovers at the moment of Dido's death (caused by pride, proleptic hatred, madness?) is taken up by Ovid in *Epistle VII* of *Heroides*. The predominantly phatic expression of Dido's letter to her already absent lover may stem from her need for connection. For her, language, to which she is so sensitive, not only lends itself to communication, but is also a conduit for ethical values: truth or falsehood. For this reason, she does not spare bitter words about Aeneas' future lovers, whom he will likely also abandon, which he concludes with the question (v. 20): „quamque iterum **fallas, altera danda fides**”. Further on, she invokes the figure of the sea as the enforcer of the moral law that brings perjurers to justice (v. 56-57):

Nec **violasse fidem** temptantibus aequora prodest;
perfidiae poenas exigit ille locus,

The homophonic quality of the passage above – *poena* (punishment), *Poena* (Punic) – does not appear to be fortuitous. It could be reasonably argued that Dido's words do not only mark her bitter response to the forced separation but, above all, to her refusal to acknowledge Aeneas as a paragon of piety and righteousness (*virtus* and *pietas*). Let us dwell for a moment on this homophony. When reading this passage aloud, the association of *poena* (punishment) and *Poena* (Punic, Carthaginian) comes to mind irresistibly, and hence, following the principle of synonymy, the trail leads to the adjective *Punicus*. It should be noted at this point that the terms *Punicus* and *Poenus* were often used interchangeably, which was also due to the metrical complications associated with *Carthaginiensis*¹⁹. Moreover we should notice that the usage of the term *Poenus* has often negative connotations, whereas the term *Carthaginiensis* is neutral or may have even positive meaning²⁰. Does it follow from this that *perfidiae poenas* should be meant as *perfidiae Poenae*?

In Ovid's letter we have more hints to her own situation as a victim of deception (*Her.* VII 105–109):

decepit idoneus auctor;
 invidiam noxae detrahit ille meae.

¹⁹ See Matysiak 2015: 4. Its metrical form is as follows: –u–.

²⁰ Franko 1994: 153. “*Poenus* is the term of choice for negative stereotyping”, then the author concludes, that ancient authors “implicitly seek to define *Romanus* by opposition to a constructed *Poenus*”.

diva parens seniorque pater, pia sarcina nati,
 spem mihi mansuri rite dedere viri.
si fuit errandum, causas habet **error** honestas.

Let us take a closer look at these words. After all, if Aeneas had made up his story of a caring son and father, a fugitive and wanderer from Troy, then Dido, believing in his nobility and bravery, fell victim to his deception, which in her eyes was partly justified. If he had not, he transgressed the hero's code of conduct, thus being unworthy of his heroic status.²¹ The queen distances herself from Aeneas' perfidy, accusing him of fostering a false public image of himself, and putting forward her honesty (*honestas*) as a counterpoint (v. 109): "If I was mistaken, the error had an honest cause". Tellingly, the liar is from Troy and the victim of his deceit is a Carthaginian woman.

The character of Anna is used, intentionally or not, by both poets to strengthen the dramatic force of the story. In Ovid's version, Anna knows about Dido's affair, but it is questionable whether she is privy to her suicidal thoughts. In Virgil's poem, she is dumbfounded and devastated by her sister's suicide. Moreover, it is useful to add that both poets employ multiple words connoting truth and lies, including:

Aeneid: bilingui, ambiguus, insidia, error, **periurus**, credita, dolus, fidere, facies (armorum), mentiri, **fallere**, **fraus**,
Heroides: fidem violare, perfidia, perfidus, **periuria**, **fraus**, **falsus**, decipere, error, honestus, fingere.

It follows from this that Ovid generally does not copy the vocabulary of his great predecessor, but rather tries to enrich this range of words.

Ovid's Book III of the *Fasti* includes a passage that invites the reader to question the author's intentions. In this scene, Dido's sister, Anna, lives with Aeneas and his wife, Lavinia, but Lavinia, jealous of the beautiful stranger, wants to get rid of her as soon as possible. Then, at night, the spectre of Dido appears to urge Anna to flee from the house and its malicious hosts in haste (v. 639–642):

nox erat: ante torum visa est adstare sororis
 squalenti Dido sanguinolenta coma
 et 'fuge, ne dubita, maestum fuge' dicere 'tectum';
 sub verbum querulas impulit aura fores.

²¹ The poet resorts to another myth to persuade the sceptical reader that his account of his exile experience is true (*Tristia* I 5; *Ex Ponto* IV 16). Namely, he refers to Odysseus, and especially to his sojourn in the land of Phaeacians (*Odyssey* IX–XII), as the main reference point as the teller of fantastic and unconfirmed stories related in the *Odyssey*. This, at least, could be gathered from the specific place that the scene of Odysseus' stay on the island occupies in the text (*Ex Ponto* IV 16).

However, can the reader be certain that it is the “real” ghost of Dido that warns her sister? Or is it merely a ruse masterminded by Lavinia? Even if it is a hoax intended to frighten Anna, this reading offers another “unorthodox” point of view because here too the Phoenician woman finds herself on the receiving end of one’s scheming.²² We even could conclude that Anna serves as a subtle measure of truth and falsehood in both stories. After all, both versions of the story appear to portray Dido’s suicide as a form of deception. In modern suicidology, a suicide attempt can be a form of a desperate call for help rather than an actual intention to take one’s own life. This act is often called a pseudo-suicide. The person who attempts a mock-suicide is mostly interested in making an impression on those around them. It may also transpire that the attempt is serious, but the perpetrator hopes to be saved. Women are reported to be much less successful than men in suicide attempts²³. Dido, however, did bring her attempt to fruition. Her life could only be saved by the perpetrator of her suffering. Dido commits suicide not only because of her spurned love, but due to a sense of responsibility for her war-stricken country. The Carthaginian queen in Virgil’s poem is indeed a true *virago*,²⁴ her suicide is intended and carried out with male determination and strength. The instrument of her suicide, a sword, is typically masculine, unlike poison or hanging²⁵ (see, for example, Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex* or Phaedra in *Hippolytus*)²⁶. Similarly, Canace and Lucretia take their lives with a sword. The sword, moreover, was the symbol of death²⁷.

To return to Virgil’s epic poem Anna feels deceived by her sister, as she knew nothing of her planned suicide. In Ovid’s work, the queen questions the veracity of Aeneas. However, she does so only in the moment of despair. The younger poet subtly refers to the previously mentioned phrase “perfidiae poenas”, which is reminiscent of “perfidia Poena”, which in turn marks a bitter reference to perfidy attributed here to the Trojans rather than stereotypically Phoenicians.

It is also worth mentioning the special bond between women associated with Aeneas. In Virgil’s work, there is a particular symmetry or analogy between Dido and Creusa based on the chiasmic principle: Dido speaks but is silent after death; Creusa is silent but speaks after her death. Therefore, they are granted the right to speak only once.

²² It is also unclear whether the fact that Dido’s tombstone inscription quoted verbatim in *Fasti* (III 359) after *Heroides* (VII 195–196) is intended as a form of intratextual play or if it serves to stress the “veracity” of the queen’s tragic end as depicted in this story. The story of Dido is used as an example in the consideration of the literary fiction in Pelletier (2003).

²³ See Canetto, Sakinofsky 1998: 22–23.

²⁴ See Sapota 2016: 7.

²⁵ See Loraux 1987: 7–9 and Fulkerson 2002: 342.

²⁶ See Brown 2001: 25.

²⁷ For more on the Roman’s particular ideas regarding suicide, see Sapota 2009, and for a comparison between suicide in antiquity and in modern times, see Gryksa 2017.

In the work of the younger poet, Dido, in her letter to the unfaithful lover, is endowed with a special gift of foretelling the future: she mentions Creusa bitterly and foresees Lavinia, thus picturing the constellation of his women. Let us also note the significant and obvious contrast between Aeneas' appearance in the older epic and the later epistolary elegies. In Virgil's work, he can defend and justify himself. In Ovid's, he is *a priori* deprived of this privilege.

However, it is difficult to agree with the opinion about Dido's two-dimensional and partly political image in Virgil versus the Dido in Ovid, who expresses a wide spectrum of emotions. I think that we should rather read both texts, which are so intimately related, and enjoy the wonderful interplay between them, especially in her eminent personage, depicted so differently by the two authors. Moreover, we absolutely can accept without reservation Richard Heinze's opinion that Virgil's Dido is "the only character created by a Roman poet to pass into world literature"²⁸. I believe that we should also add here the Dido created by Ovid. We are to appreciate them both as not only deceived but also innocent, pure, proud and deeply wounded by fatal love²⁹.

SUMMARY

Dido, as the embodiment of Carthage, seriously threatened the existence of Rome through the brilliant Hannibal, centuries after the events portrayed in *Aeneid*.³⁰ Judged by the stereotypes of her day, this queen and her nation were considered deceitful and duplicitous. However, in the works of Virgil and Ovid, Dido is portrayed as a victim of her credulity, which she demonstrated when she trusted³¹ in Aeneas, the progenitor of the Romans. In the dual image of the Carthaginian heroine we should see the paradox of her symbolic figure as Queen of Carthage, and thus a stereotype of falsity as well as of terror and fear for Romans, and who is eventually deceived and feels herself to be an innocent victim of *perfidia Romana*.

²⁸ See Heinze 1993: 133.

²⁹ In the detailed and subtle paper by Covi (1964) we can find a richness of such epithets concerning Dido's situation and emotions.

³⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising that the figure of Hannibal or references to him appear relatively often in Roman literature, both in historical and philosophical works (Livy, see Giusti 2019, Cicero, see Vicenze 1985), poems (Silius Italicus, see Matusiak 2015), and even comedies (Plautus, see Skwara 2014).

³¹ We cannot consider her words as the basis of future Carthage's hostility against Rome (I 573–574), nor as disingenuous (Horsfall 2020:11–26) but as a sincere offer of sharing the kingdom with Aeneas (Vicenzi 1985: 98–99 and 105).

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