

Dido and Aeneas

IT would appear somewhat late in the day to be discussing the ancient love story of Dido and Aeneas, nor would there have been any need to spill more ink over it but for Seneviratne's article, 'The Jilting of Dido—its dramatic logic' appearing in the last issue of the *University Review*.

Seneviratne is obviously a lover of Virgil, but one of that not unfamiliar band that can bear to see no flaws in the beloved. Yet true love, I had always thought, can afford not to be blind. It were well to remember the dictum of Longinus that

“great genius is far from being flawless... While mean and mediocre talent is faultless because it runs no risks and never aims at the heights, the great are fallible because of their very greatness.”¹

Seneviratne is upset over the many adverse criticisms of Virgil's handling of Aeneas in Aeneid IV. “Is it fair,” he asks “to damn the creative artist for the character of his creature?” The answer is, I think, “Yes. If the artist lets the creature get out of hand so as to thwart his own intention”—which, I hope to prove, Virgil has done.

The appeal to Shakespeare's Prince Hal does not, in my opinion, assist Seneviratne's argument. While I hesitate to touch on topics of which I have no specialised knowledge (particularly when the topic is as controversial as that of Prince Hal) it would, I think, be true to say that Shakespeare's presentation of Prince Hal is impersonal. He holds no brief for him. While Virgil definitely holds a brief for Aeneas. It is his intention to present him as Aeneas, the saint, symbol of Roman virtue. By his very intention Virgil restricts his own freedom and denies himself the ideal objectivity of the artist. The result is that Aeneas is often an unnatural creature, sometimes superhuman, but sometimes also, as in Book IV, almost inhuman.

“Virgil,” says Seneviratne “may have designed Aeneas to exhibit qualities that we find less likeable than dutiful.” This view has been held before and may in fact be true. But even if it is, it can be shown that Virgil was not very comfortable about his design—not, at any rate, where Dido was concerned. The awakening of Aeneas's conscience in Book VI,² which Seneviratne refers to, is itself proof of this. The important point is that in Book IV Aeneas had

1. Longinus de Sublimitate 33.2.

2. Aeneid 6. 469 ff.

no conscience. Why, if Aeneas was doing his duty in deserting Dido, does his conscience bother him in the Underworld? It is because Virgil has a conscience which is pricked by his hero's treatment of Dido, because, I suggest, it was not what he intended.

Consider the detail of the story. The dice are loaded against Dido from the very beginning. Venus, to ensure Aeneas's safety in Carthage uses her arts and those of her infamous son to work Dido into a state of passion for Aeneas. Juno hopes to convert this to her advantage by binding Aeneas irrevocably to Dido. To this end she engineers the 'cave-marriage.' One is entitled to assume here that Juno relied on Aeneas, because of his 'pietas,' not to back out after the event. Venus consents to Juno's plan, though laughing up her sleeve.³ And well she may, for Juppiter has assured her that nothing can keep Aeneas out of Italy.⁴ Aeneas will not be committed by the 'cave-marriage': It is important to note that he does not lose his heart to Dido. Right through the book the emphasis is on Dido's passion for Aeneas. There is not a word to suggest that Aeneas was similarly smitten. And it is Dido, not Aeneas, who regards the 'cave-union' as a marriage.⁵ Virgil has taken every precaution to make it easy for Aeneas to desert Dido. It is true that for a time Aeneas forgets Italy, yet not because he was in love with Dido but because Dido and Carthage were very pleasant and restful after many years' wandering over the seas. The fact that Aeneas was not in love with Dido is made abundantly clear by the sequel to the 'cave-marriage.' But before I proceed to the evidence for it, I would like to point out that this fact, while it makes Aeneas's escape easier for him, puts the reader out of sympathy with him. He not only enjoys an unfair advantage over Dido, but he takes advantage of Dido. He continues to live on Dido's hospitality, to accept her love, to appear with her in public like her consort, though decency would require that he break with her immediately.

And now to come to the evidence that Aeneas was not in love. When Mercury reminds him of his forgotten destiny what does Aeneas do?

'ardet abire fuga dulcisque relinquere terras.'⁶

Had he been in love he could not have been so eager. Must there not have been a conflict within him between love and duty? But there is no conflict. To be sure there is a hint in the line quoted above that it is painful

3. Aeneid 4. 128.

4. Aeneid 1. 257 ff.

5. Aeneid 4. 172.

6. Aeneid 4. 281.

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to leave a sweet land—but is the “sweet land” not “the sweet Dido.” For the rest his first thought is how to ‘get round’ the Queen

‘quo nunc reginam ambire furentem audeat adfatu?’⁷
and ‘quis rebus dexter modus?’⁸

It is all too clear that Aeneas here thinks only of himself. In order to be dutiful is it necessary to be so selfish?

Consider also how Aeneas answers Dido’s reproaches. He gives her the cold comfort of

nec me meminisse pigebit Elissae⁹

and proceeds to make that most damning of all statements

nec coniugis unquam
praetendi taedas aut haec in foedera veni.¹⁰

It is the trivial legal aspect of the situation that strikes Aeneas not the moral. What, one asks oneself, is Aeneas’s valuation of Dido? And what of himself? Does he not by this reply place himself on a level with the sailor who has a wife in every port? Yet this is not Virgil’s ‘pius Aeneas.’ Aeneas’s defence of himself rings hollow. It is rhetoric, not passion. Its insincerity is due to Virgil’s awareness of the weakness of Aeneas’s position. Try as he may to put the burden of responsibility upon ‘duty’ his heart tells him that right is on Dido’s side. And so while for Aeneas he pleads with legal astuteness for Dido he pleads with the heart. Hence the impassioned quality of Dido’s denunciation,¹¹ hence what Mackail refers to as ‘the broken inconsequence’ of

tu lacrimis evicta meis, tu prima furentem
his, germana, malis oneras, atque obicis hosti.
non licuit thalami expertem sine crimine vitam
degere more feras, talis nec tangere curas.
non servata fides cineri promissa Sychaeo.¹²

Hence the madness and despair in

ferte citi flammam, date tela, impellite remos.
quid loquor aut ubi sum? quae mentem insania mutat?¹³

Here you have that tragic conflict within the soul of which Aeneas shows no trace.

7. Aeneid 4. 283.
8. Aeneid 4. 294.
9. Aeneid 4. 335.
10. Aeneid 4. 338.
11. Aeneid 4. 365 ff.
12. Aeneid 4. 548 ff.
13. Aeneid 4. 593 ff.

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Not only is Aeneas's reply to Dido unsatisfactory, his whole conduct subsequently is unnatural. He is distressed, you are told at verse 393

multa gemens magnoque animum labefactus amore
iussa tamen divum exsequitur classemque revisit.

One expects some proof of this in his conduct. Yet when Anna appeals to him he remains unmoved, he is like the strong oak unshaken by the winds.¹⁴ This perhaps one might regard as explained by the

fata obstant placidasque viri deus obstruit auris

But it is surely strange that while Dido tosses upon 'a mighty sea of passion' Aeneas at verse 553 is fast asleep on board his flagship. His anxiety for Dido does not keep him awake. His conscience does not bother him. He sleeps the sleep of the just, and he has to be woken up by a god

'nate dea, potes hoc sub casu ducere somnum,'¹⁵

Even Mercury is surprised, and one hopes for a moment he is about to rebuke Aeneas for his lack of conscience, but he too is only thinking of Aeneas's safety: for he continues

'nec quae te circum stant deinde pericula cernis'

After that one is, I think, justified in feeling that Virgil's 'multa gemens magnoque animum labefactus amore' at verse 393 is merely conventional.

It is impossible not to be dissatisfied with the Aeneas of Book IV. He fails because he is not human, and his failure is accentuated by the contrast with Dido who is so intensely human. But how has Virgil allowed Aeneas to fail? The most likely explanation is that Aeneas failed because Dido succeeded better than Virgil at first intended. Aeneas appears heartless only because Dido is treated so sympathetically. Now it was obviously not Virgil's intention to present Aeneas as heartless. Therefore Virgil did not intend at first to treat Dido sympathetically. Seneviratne does not like the theory that Virgil is 'partly a follower and partly an adapter of Homer.' Yet it is clear that Aeneas would not have appeared heartless had Dido been a Circe. And the old theory is probably correct that Virgil did in fact originally cast Dido in the part of a Circe, but there suddenly blossomed in his mind a conception of a theme 'greater than the Odyssey.' A new Dido replaced the old, and ran away with Virgil's heart. Yet traces of the old Dido have not been completely eradicated. Virgil, it should be remembered, left his work incomplete.

14. Aeneid 4. 437 ff.

15. Aeneid 4. 560.

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There is fairly good evidence in the poem of two conflicting attitudes adopted by Virgil towards Dido and the Carthaginians. When Aeneas is forced ashore at Carthage, Juppiter in order to allay Venus's fears on his behalf sends Mercury to Carthage

' ut terrae utque novae pateant Karthaginis arces
hospitio Teucris, ne fati nescia Dido
finibus arceret.¹⁶

Dido was to be feared and had to be prepared beforehand by divine agency. Venus, not entirely satisfied with this precaution hides him in a mist on his way to the city

' cernere ne quis eos neve quis contingere posset
molirive moram aut veniendi poscere causas.¹⁷

She further seeks to ensure Aeneas's safety by smiting Dido with love for Aeneas, because, says Virgil

' domum timet ambiguum Tyriosque bilinguis¹⁸

Dido and her Carthaginians are a treacherous lot. Incidentally the story of Sychaeus reminds one of the general atmosphere of intrigue and murder that was felt by Virgil to have prevailed amongst them. At verse 670 Venus says to her son Cupid

' hunc Phoenissa tenet Dido blandisque moratur
vocibus

as though Dido were an enchantress, when all she had done was (in accordance with the will of the gods) to grant asylum to Aeneas. The epithet Phoenissa is not otiose. The Romans would understand it as conveying an attitude of distrust towards Dido. Venus is also determined 'capere ante dolis. . . reginam'—¹⁹ "cunningly to captivate the queen before"—but before what? Before she captivated him? It will be remembered also that Aeneas was 'on fire to escape in flight,'²⁰ as a man might be who was kept a prisoner.

This attitude of suspicion towards Dido and the Carthaginians is at variance with another that more generally pervades the episode. In Book I Carthage is a civilised country, its people are well informed, they are even artists: e.g. scenes from the Trojan wars are depicted on the walls of the

16. Aeneid 1. 298 ff.

17. Aeneid 1. 412 ff.

18. Aeneid 1. 661.

19. Aeneid 1. 673.

20. Aeneid 4. 281.

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temple. A Trojan had no need to fear such a people. Does not Virgil say when Aeneas saw these paintings

' hoc primum in luco nova res oblata timorem
leniit, hic primum Aeneas sperare salutem
ausus'²¹

and Aeneas exclaims with relief

sunt hic etiam praemia laudi
sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.
solve metus.'²²

Why then did Venus fear? And what need for Jupiter to prepare Dido? Further, when Dido first appears she is compared to Diana, and she is shown administering justice. Dido in reply to Ilioneus asserts with grave dignity the culture and humanity of her people. Her whole speech beginning at verse 561 should be noted and in particular these two verses

' non obtusa adeo gestamus pectora Poeni
nec tam aversus equos Tyria Sol iungit ab urbe.'

How Virgil came to conceive of Dido as the great ruler of a great people, and not as a Circe, one cannot say. It was a happy inspiration. But I would like to suggest that History and Virgil's own fairness of mind had something to do with this. It seemed monstrous to Virgil to suggest that the ancestor of the Great Hannibal was a witch. The normal Roman attitude towards Carthage was prejudiced. They were a lot of treacherous Orientals. Livy for instance does not do justice to the Carthaginians or to Hannibal. Virgil imbibed this prejudice early and for a time it came natural to him to regard them with suspicion. But as he studied the past he became convinced of the wrongness of the Roman view. He redresses that wrong by doing honour to Dido. If this is true, there is cause to rejoice over the fall of Aeneas in Book IV. Virgil has risen above the prejudices of his people. And perhaps Aeneas's prickings of conscience about Dido in Book VI are a reflection of Virgil's own conscience about Carthage. Was she not brutally razed to the ground? Carthage like Dido was wronged. Virgil could only consent to this because he believed in the divinely ordained destiny of Aeneas and the Roman race. Many had to fall that Rome might rise. Yet even while Virgil wills to accept this creed, his heart questions it. That is why in Book IV his sympathies are with Dido. Virgil is at conflict within himself.

Other proof of this conflict between heart and creed may be found in the episodes of Turnus and Amata. Here too, those who had done no wrong had

21. Aeneid I. 450.

22. Aeneid I. 461.

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to suffer that Aeneas might triumph. Latinus, obedient like Aeneas to the gods, broke his pledge to Turnus that he should have Lavinia in marriage. He is unmoved by the appeal of Amata, yet Amata was justified in protesting

‘quid tua sancta fides? quid cura antiqua tuorum
et consanguineo totiens data dextera Turno?’²³

As in the case of Dido, so in the case of Amata and of Turnus, Virgil is pre-occupied with the harshness of their lot. Nowhere does he reveal his sympathy so strikingly as in that pathetic episode in Bk. XII. 55 ff. While Amata pleads with Turnus not to engage Aeneas in battle Lavinia is also there

acceptit vocem lacrimis Lavinia matris
flagrantis perfusa genas, cui plurimus ignem
subiecit rubor et calefacta per ora cucurrit’²⁴

What was it that prompted Virgil at this stage to reveal with such delicate pathos Lavinia’s love for Turnus? What, but his compassion for them. It was no accident also that Virgil’s last word in the Aeneid is on the side of Turnus the fallen enemy

‘vitaque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras’

His soul is ‘indignant’ because he has been wronged. The path of Rome’s destiny is paved not only with the trials of Aeneas but with the dead bodies of two innocent victims, Dido and Turnus. It was for Virgil a fact though mysterious. Life, full of puzzles, prompted Virgil to exclaim with a sigh of envy and yearning

‘felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causas’

I must confess I cannot see how ‘the prime and ultimate purpose of the love story’ can be as Seneviratne suggests the reversal of the judgement of Paris. Paris rejected Hera for Aphrodite and power for love. Aeneas might have reversed the judgement by either rejecting Venus for Juno or choosing power instead of love. He is so far from doing the first that by rejecting Dido he further angers an already angry Juno. As for the second Aeneas never had any choice. The essential condition of a choice is lacking in his case—namely that the chooser should feel himself to be a free agent. Aeneas never had this feeling, and if he had he would have gone back to Troy, not forward to Rome:

‘me si fata meis paterentur ducere vitam
auspiciis et sponte mea componere curas,
urbem Troianam primum dulcisque meorum

23. Aeneid 7. 365.

24. Aeneid 12. 64.

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reliquias colerem, Priami tecta alta manerent,
et recidiva manu posuissem Pergama victis.²⁵

I find also distressing Seneviratne's interpretation of Aeneas's boast in Bk. I. 378-379 as deliberately intended by Virgil to make Aeneas comic. His misinterpretation is due again to his reluctance to concede that Virgil imitates Homer and sometimes fails. 'When' he says 'we hear the words of Odysseus we hear them as the court of Alcinous heard them and we acclaim them as sublime. But Virgil, when he puts like words into the mouth of Aeneas, makes us hear with the ear of a goddess: and therefore we find them silly. This is perhaps Virgil's way of steadying his reader against the pathos that waits to wring him in Book IV.'

To make his hero look silly was never surely Virgil's intention, nor does a good artist in order to 'steady his reader against pathos' do violence to the character of his hero. It is to be noted that in spite of the disguised Venus's denial that she is a goddess, Aeneas addresses her as 'dea.' And yet he proceeds to use those apparently boastful words. The fact is that Virgil intended in those words an ironic comment upon his plight made by Aeneas himself. Seneviratne would have seen this if instead of punctuating arbitrarily at 'notus' he had read, as he should have

'sum pius Aeneas, raptos qui ex hoste penatis
classe veho mecum; fama super aethera notus
Italiam quaero patriam.'²⁶

as who should say 'Here am I dutiful and famous, yet with nowhere to lay my head.' To use a good colloquial idiom 'What price duty and fame?' The irony is clearly pointed a few lines later by the words

'ipse ignotus, egens, Libyae deserta peragro,
Europa atque Asia pulsus'²⁷

"fama super aethera notus". . . 'ipse ignotus'—known by fame, but unknown in fact, a wanderer upon the face of the earth.

Venus at any rate was not amused by Aeneas's words. She recognised in them the accents of complaint and distress

'nec plura quentem
passa Venus medio sic interfata dolore est.'²⁸

25. Aeneid 4. 341.

26. Aeneid 1. 378.

27. Aeneid 1. 384.

28. Aeneid 1. 385.

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As for those laughing gods that Seneviratne speaks of I look for them in vain in the Aeneid. Juppiter indeed smiles condescendingly when he wishes to console Venus in I. 254 and Juno in XII. 829

' olli subridens hominum deumque repertor '

Venus laughed once with malicious joy at discovering Juno's guile (or because she too had a trick up her sleeve)

non adversa petenti
adnuat atque dolis risit Cytherea repertis.²⁹

For the rest there are no echoes in Virgil's Olympus of that celestial laughter that once rang unquenchable in the halls of Homer's immortals.

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²⁹ Aeneid 4: 127.