The Jilting of Dido: Its Dramatic Logic

A work beyond the province of Virgil's genius[1] is Professor Conington's estimate of the Aeneid. In Virgil's hero Professor Page sees " but the shadow of a man." He finds Aeneas " contemptible " for his abandoning of Dido after accepting her love. " How the man who wrote the lines placed in Dido's mouth could immediately afterwards speak of ' the good Aeneas, etc.' is," he declares, " one of the puzzles of literature." " Virgil seems unmoved by his own genius," Professor Page supposes.[2]

But what real foundation has this verdict ? What evidence is there that Virgil was unmoved ? or that he condones his hero's treatment of Dido ? Must the writer of epic, and of an epic too whose purport is historic, draw his hero as though he were drawing a saint ? Has it occurred to any of the critics, as part of the solution of their puzzle, that Virgil, while at pains to present his Aeneas, Rome's national hero, as a dutiful, courageous and in many other ways virtuous character, may still have *designed* him to exhibit at times qualities which we find less likeable than dutiful ?

If this was indeed Virgil's purpose, it means, of course, that he was in this dramatic poem deliberately, and even audaciously, setting up a new artistic pinciple. But it is a principle to which kings of the drama have, consciously or not, paid tribute by adopting it. Shakespeare, sixteen centuries afterwards, leads out an unbroken pageant of English history from Richard II to Henry VI. Across three of these plays strides the heroic figure of Shakespeare's and England's warrior king, Prince Hal at first, afterwards Henry V. Yet Shakespeare, ever mindful of the dramatic force of his theme, never shirks disclosing the less pleasing traits of this hero's character. As Prince he exploits his friend, Falstaff, proposing all the time to desert him at the right moment, to better his own repute. Is this contemptible ? It is " the most damnable piece of workmanship " to be found in any of Shakespeare's plays, says Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch.[3]

But what, let us not forget, was Shakespeare's theme ? At the feet of Sir Arthur himself, let us remember that the first four of these plays " carry the house of Lancaster from its usurpation to the highest point of prosperity ";[4] and that the progress of this rise is " dogged throughout by a sense of fate, an apprehension that what has been evilly won cannot endure, a tedium upon

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1. Introduction to Volume II of the Aeneid.
2. Introduction to Virgil, Elementary Classics series.
3. " Shakespeare's Workmanship," T. Fisher Urwin, Ltd., (1924), p. 154.
4. " Shakespeare's Workmanship," p. 138.

each success and an incapacity for joy in it."[5] Of the figures that take their places in this " procession of doom " Henry V is one. Is Shakespeare to blame, then, for demonstrating that Prince Hal, with all his estimable qualities, is still true to his type? that his blood is verily fet from a father who had, in his time and in his own way, made as cold and calculating a use of his friends?

Is it fair to damn the creative artist for the character of his creature? Is it reasonable to assume that he condones their every act? As Dr. Bradley observes of Shakespeare, he is " like the sun, lighting up everything and judging nothing. He shows us all, but leaves the judgment to us."[6] He shows us, in Richard II, " vaulting Bolingbroke " usurping a crown. And in Henry V we see the son of Bolingbroke praying on procrastinative knee:

> Not today, O Lord!
> O! not today, think not upon the fault
> My father made in compassing the crown.

In Henry IV he shows us Prince Hal associating with Falstaff in order that, when the time comes for forsaking his friend, " he may be more wondered at." When that time comes, he shows this Prince, new crowned, prove an ingrate to the friend who taught him joy. And in Henry VI, Part 3, we find the son of this same Prince, his crown falling and his throne tottering, still haunted by the ancestral " sense of fate," the apprehension " that things ill got had ever bad success," that the misdeeds of his father are now being visited on him.

Virgil's hero too, also for reasons of state, proves an ingrate—an ingrate to the queen who had befriended him in the day of his distress. But is it fair to Virgil to assume that he condones this conduct? To what extent can the hero himself be held to condone it? For it was an act, he declares, not of his own volition. " Invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi,"[7] he protests to the shade of Dido. Commenting on the passage in which this line occurs, Dr. Eliot says:

> "Dido's behaviour appears almost as a projection of Aeneas' own conscience: this, we feel, is the way in which Aeneas' conscience would *expect* Dido to behave to him. The point, it seems to me, is not that Dido is unforgiving—though it is important that, instead of railing at him, she merely snubs him—perhaps the most telling snub in all poetry: what matters most is that Aeneas does not forgive himself—. . . "[8]

Dr. Eliot chooses this as an example of which he calls the civilised manners of Virgil. It testifies, he claims, to Virgil's civilised consciousness and conscience.

5. " Shakespeare's Workmanship," p. 139.
6. "Oxford Lectures on Poetry," MacMillan & Co., Ltd. (1920), p. 255.
7. Aeneid VI, 460.
8. " What Is a Classic?" by T. S. Eliot, Faber and Faber, Ltd. (1945), p. 21.

Which is, of course, a way of saying that this is how *Virgil* feels Aeneas deserves to be treated for his treatment of Dido.

But the argument can go further than the scope of Dr. Eliot's discourse has taken it. The shade of Anchises shows Aeneas and expounds to him a stately pageant. Warriors, kings and Caesars pass. Still, the future to which all look is a terrestrial future. It is an Elysian fantasy of earthly renown—the grandeur that is to be Rome on the Hesperian soil Aeneas has at last found. But not in this sunset does the search end for Virgil. And when Virgil plumbs the depths and questions the darkness, it is Dido who of her silence reverbs the response—a Dido who stands like flint while the jilter pleads; like crag of Marpesa which the chisel chastens into Beauty's marble image; in the field of mourning a Dido comforted:

> Nec magis incepto voltum sermone movetur
> Quam si dura silex aut stet Marpesia cautes.
> Tandem corripuit sese, atque inimica refugit
> In nemus umbriferum, coniunx ubi pristinus illi
> Respondet curis, aequatque Sychaeus amorem.[9]

Lines vocal with enchanted echo are two of these. In the second of them there is a striving after assonance, which at first seems to fail. The fourth foot, " stet Mar–," falls just short of assonance with the preceding one, " –lex aut," and the echo dies a dissonance. " Cautes," the last foot, remembers a drowned first, " quam si." " Cautes " is also a reversed echo of the vowel sounds of " –lex aut." And " cautes " is, at last, an assonant echo of the sound of " aut stet," which is no foot but fragments of the two dissonant feet. Catching up the broken pieces, the echo welds them into a harmonious whole. And, best of all, it chimes the yearning, uphill stress of " aut stet " into the satisfied, restful, abiding poise of " cautes." Other echoes sound in the fourth of the lines quoted. Here they peal a triple chime, and now they come as from a distance. " –iunx ubi " echoes the vowel sounds of " –mus umbri–", and " -briferum " the vowel sounds of " in nemus." " Pristinus," although it slightly varies one of these vowel sounds, is vitually a re-echo of both " in nemus " and " -briferum." And while these echoes float about the gloom, " in " and " um– " and " –rum " and " con– " and "–iun– " keep tolling to each other with an answering resonance.

II.

But to answer that Virgil is no condoner of the jilting is to give a merely partial solution of the puzzle. It is at best a negative statement. If Virgil does not approve of this behaviour; if Aeneas' conduct was such as Aeneas

9. Aeneid VI, 470 to 474.

himself could not forgive; and if Virgil was not, as Page supposes him, "unmoved by his own genius," why, it has yet to be explained, did he make Aeneas, pius Aeneas, act in this way? For this Dido-Aeneas story is purely a product of Virgil's imagination. And it was an imagination unfettered of history and its facts. There was, it is true, a queen of Carthage, named Dido. But she lived three-hundred years after the date assigned to the fall of Troy; she never could have seen Aeneas. That Dido, it is true, killed herself. But she did it to remain faithful to the memory of her dead husband; she never was enamoured of another. In treating Dido and Aeneas as contemporaries Virgil had, no doubt, the precedent of Naevius' "Bellum Punicum." But that narrative nowhere presents the two as lovers. To history or to legend the Dido of the Aeneid owes little. All of her that cannot die she derives from Virgil. Even when she deals death to herself she but strikes life into the poet's thought.

What, then, is Virgil's thought, and whither does it lead? To what end has he, in his conceiving of the architecture of Roman destiny, brought in this love affair? For the sake, commentators have supposed, of following Homeric tradition. If, says Pope, Ulysses be detained from his return by the allurements of Calypso, so is Aeneas by Dido. And the story of these lovers is taken, Pope quotes Macrobius as saying, from the loves of Medea and Jason in Apollonius.[10] A present-day writer, Mr. F. J. H. Letters, also takes this view when he describes Virgil as "partly a follower and partly an adapter of Homer." "As Circe and Calypso," he says, "detain Odysseus on their magic isles, Dido delays the founder of Rome at Carthage."[11]

But the magic of those Circe and Calypso isles is that, "opening on the foam of perilous seas," they forget the main. In this Carthage of the Aeneid is wizardry of another sort: it forgets nothing. It scans both past and future, and balances with even scale. It looks long before and long after. Far behind, it sees the judgment of Paris and the fall of Troy. And far, far ahead, it sees the rise of Rome. Carthage, the Carthage of Dido and Aeneas, sets itself up in the Aeneid as a judgment seat from which a new judge, "fatalis" as ever the earlier was, may revise the old award. Aeneas lingering in Libya, forgetful of his errand, prizing love above aught else, is but a second Paris, whose

"Blood, pulse and breast confirm the Dardan Shepherd's prize."

Aeneas renouncing love, leaving for Italy at what be deems the call of duty,

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10. Introduction to Pope's translation of the Iliad and the Odyssey, edited by Rev. H. F. Cary, George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., p. 4.

11. "Virgil," Speed and Ward (1946), p. 110.

proves himself the "Justum Et Tenacem Propositi Virum,"[12] worthy of winning from Juno's relenting lip the gracious fiat, "Stet Capitolium fulgens triumphatisque possit Roma ferox dare jura Medis."[13] He is then a fate-sent reverser of fate's own decree.

This and nothing less seems to me the prime and the ultimate purpose of this love story. And through Dido it is that the poet's thought hits the very dome of its immense design. That dome commands, to be sure, more aspects than one; and they observe not untruly who see in Dido's Carthage a foreshadowing of the historic relations between Dido and Rome. Dido's influence, says Mr. Letters,

> "apparently so remote from and even prejudicial to interests of state, is represented as germinating the greatest chapter in Roman history. It accounts for and predicts the Punic wars that laid the foundations of the Empire. It is through Dido's curse that this distant age is conjured up for us . . ."[14]

The curse of Dido has certainly its bearing on Rome's Punic wars. Yet, as those wars are but a chapter of Rome's history, so is Roman history itself, as Virgil reads it, but a chapter in the vast of destiny. And this it is that proportions Virgil's design.

That design is to make of Carthage a venue for confronting the founder of Rome with two conflicting ideologies, two divergent outlooks on the universe. It becomes "his victorious field" when, to the end that Rome may rise he rejects the one and follows the other; turns from Carthage and sails for Italy. Is there not in this a profound truth? Of what build are the pillars that prop empires but of "gravitas," duty, statecraft, prudence, worldly wisdom? Do they not rise only when the heyday in the blood has waited upon the judgment? And the opposites—"levitas," love, luxury, the life of pleasure—are these not causes that have precipitated the downfall of nations? These are lessons which history never tires of repeating.

"These things, Ulysses,
The wise bards also
Behold and sing;"

but in a dialect all their own; in terms of decrees of fate, gods and goddesses, prizes of Paris, choices of Aeneas.

And in terms also of Carthage and Italy, which, as Virgil employs them in the Aeneid, mean more than their geography. Carthage is the favourite city of Juno; and Juno's is the pride which the judgment of Paris has wounded. Italy is fallen Troy's land of promise—the promise of a Rome that is to rise.

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12. and 13. Horace's Odes, III, 3.

14. "Virgil," p. 124.

But, because Aeneas chooses as Paris chose, and so long as Aeneas lingers in that choice, the city of Juno holds him from Italy and prevents the fulfilling of that promise. From Carthage and from Italy fate pulls in opposite ways. And this opposition endures. Not even when Aeneas reverses the judgment does the enmity between Carthage and Rome end. For then the curse of Dido breathes it into a yet formless but quickening future.

This opposition between Karthago and Italia surges in the thunder of the lines that open the Aeneid. Virgil's use of extra syllables is indeed a subject on which much might be written. But it will be enough for the present purpose to show how he employs the device in the 13th line of the Aeneid. The first instance in the Aeneid of an extra syllable—of two of them, in fact—occurs in line 3, " litora multum ille et terris iactatus et alto." The extras here are the " -um " of " multum " and the " -e " of " ille." Each is a short vowel, and it is therefore easy enough, in reading the line, to sound these lightly, running each into the first syllable of the next word. This is no more than the man in Virgil's street would have done in his everyday speech. He would not completely mute the extra vowels, as the prosodist must in scanning the line. This semi-sounding of two extra syllables in one line, while not violating its metrical pattern, gives variety to the beat of the hexametre, and creates a sense of vastness in time as well as in space. The second extra syllable, following hard upon the first, combined with an adroit scheme of " l's " and " t's " and " r's," repeated and duplicated, reinforces the notion, which the words express, of tossing and tossing from sea to sea and shore to shore.

It is otherwise with the extra syllable in line 13:

> Karthago, Italiam contra Tiberinaque longe.

Here the " elided " vowel is a long one, the " o " of " Karthago." And here the sense demands a distinct pause, marked in the text with a comma, between this word and the next. For both these reasons there can be no slurring over the sound of this vowel, no gliding it into the first syllable of the next word Nor should there be. This " o " was not born for strangling; it coms of. a tremor in the heart of Virgil's poetry.

Milton inherits this unequal, murmurous beat, and it rhythms the Miltonic cadences. It throbs beneath the noise of drums and timbrels loud when Milton tells how Moloch led wisest Solomon to build

> " His temple right against the temple of God."[15]

Sometimes one hears, it is true, " templ' of " for " temple of," when words half-unpronounced, slide through prosodial lips. But the extra syllable

15. Paradise Lost, I, 402.

charged with threat and heavy with challenge, is not there for nothing. Impinging on the ear's metrical expectation, it reinforces the notion of an high place for the abomination of the children of Ammon rising impingent on the hill that was before Jerusalem. So is the burden of Virgil's extra " o " when he sets Karthago and Italia fronting each other.

And this is no chance encounter. It is the ponderous impact of forces that have been gathering. Three long " o's " and three long " i's " have blared out in the very first line, " Arma virumque cano Troiae qui primus ab oris." These notes have in the succeeding lines kept steadily, if less insistently, resounding. In the 12th line their number rose to four. And then, in the 13th, Karthago and Italia stand face to face, while the long, deep " o " of Karthago trumpets to the long, sharp " i " of Italia. A little further on, in line 16, " posthabita coluisse Samo; hic illius arma," a long " o " once more abuts a long " i." But this " o " is " in hiatus," for its function here is not to sound a challenge. Here Juno is well pleased. Here is her favoured city, unrivalled even of Samos. Therefore these abutting vowels strike here an unimpinging note of pure concent; and this contrast serves to make the tone of challenge in line 13 the more expressive.

It is the Muse's tongue that speaks these words, Karthago and Italia. And she speaks them just when Virgil has ended his invocation to her to teach him the first causes, just when he has posited the question, " quo numine laeso, . . . ?" The names, then, as she utters them, are not merely geographical. They stand for two competing and conflicting principles, neither of which can brook the presence of the other. In Shakespeare's " Antony and Cleopatra " Mr. S. L. Bethell sees a like opposition between Egypt and Rome. They represent, he claims, " contradictory schemes of value, contradictory attitudes to, and interpretations of, the Universe."[16]

Not once indeed or twice does Rome's resurgent story display her sons beset by these alternatives. Julius Caesar, perhaps the greatest of them all, has also a chapter of Roman history. And—

> " Alcides with the distaff now he seemed
> At Cleopatra's feet,—and now himself he beamed."

Then there is Brutus, " noblest " of them all, weighing judgment against affection, private friendship against public duty, and finding that he loves not Caesar less but Rome the more. There is in another chapter—and this is Virgil's chapter too—Marc Antony choosing love and throwing away the world. There is, in the Punic Chapter, Marcus Atilius Regulus, consul in 256 B.C., who afterwards, rather than suffer his Senate to ransom him, chooses the

16. " Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition," P. S. King and Staples (1944), p. 122.

path of duty and the way to torture. There are the soldiers of Crassus, who, routed in Mesopotamia in 53 B.C., choose the lotus-eating way of life, become domiciled among Parthians, and—" pro curia inversique mores "—marry the daughters of Rome's foes. All these were fields of battle fought in Roman breasts between the two antagonist ideologies, the two divergent attitudes toward life.

Quorum pars magna fuit et ipse Vergilius. While Augustus trod the path of Empire and the way to Olympus—

> " Illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis alebat
> Parthenope, studiis florentem ignobilis oti."[17]

Like a sailor lured off his course, Virgil lay, he suggests, in that siren lap of lulling pleasure at Naples, a servant of the Muses, " ingenti percussus amore," smit with great love of woodland song. Of the English Virgil, Lord Tennyson, Sir John Squire says that he was all his life " putting duty and liking in opposition, fearful of following beauty, in distress about the course he should pursue."[18] Was there, at any point of the Roman Virgil's life, a like problem ? For to him there came, as it came to his Aeneas in Carthage, a summons. The summons to Virgil bade him turn from the lap of pleasure, from songs of wood and pasture, and string his harp to sound the alarms of war. Erstwhile lover of the " curvae falces," was he now to sing their rival, the "rigidus ensis"? In dispraise of those

> Speluncae viviquc lacus, et frigida Tempe,
> Mugitusque boum, mollesque sub arbore somni,[19]

which used to be his delight, must he now glorify instead " discordia arma " and " purpura regum "? For answer he seats himself down, takes up his style, and begins, " Arma Virumque Cano."

III.

Mr. Bernard Shaw has a habit of writing with a dichotomous pen. What he calls the prose of St. Joan's career he puts into a preface ; what he calls " the romance of her rise, the tragedy of her execution, and the comedy of the attempts of posterity to make amends for that execution " belongs, he says, to the play. In the play, though off the stage, Joan burns at the stake. What is implicit in the play, the preface directly expresses. " The tragedy

17. Georgics IV, 562-563.
18. " Essays on Poetry," William Heineman, Ltd., p. 77.
19. Georgics II, 469 and 470.

of such murders," it explains, " is that they are not committed by murderers. They are judicial murders, pious murders." Now, the jilting of Dido has a likewise tragic result. But Virgil elaborates no preface maintaining, as Mr. Shaw does, that his real concern is " what men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and women find that they must and will do in spite of their intentions." He merely lets us hear the tragic grandeur of Dido's outburst, and then proceeds, " At pius Aeneas . . ." And this is the puzzle that perplexed Conington and Page, and detracts from even present-day estimates of Virgil's worth.

But Virgil, if no dichotomist in Mr. Shaw's fashion, is acutely conscious that the action—the dramatic action—of his epic poem keeps moving on two distinct planes at the same time. " Arma virumque cano " introduces but one plane—what Mr. Shaw would call the prose of the story. To the other and higher plane Virgil points in the invocatory words, " Musa, mihi causas memora, . . ." This doubleness of action was before Virgil's eye as clearly as ever it is before Mr. Shaw's when he seeks to place before his readers " not only the visible and human puppets, but the Church, the Inquisition, the Feudal System, with divine inspiration always beating against their too inelastic limits ; all more terrible in their dramatic force than any of the little mortal figures clanking about in plate armor or moving silently in the frocks and hoods of the order of St. Dominic."

Now, in Virgil's poetic presentation of the interplay, the coming into dramatic collision, of two competing ideologies, his Aeneas, sire of the Julian race though he be, is still but one of " the visible and human puppets," " the little mortal figures." Those critics' sight is good who see in Aeneas " but the shadow of a man." Yet is their judgment sound when they ascribe this to a failure in Virgil's characterization ? Is it not rather workmanship of a level to which the Swan of Avon himself has risen in the prouder of his flights ? In " Macbeth " there is a deliberate flattening down of the virtuous characters. By effecting Macbeth's discomfiture through such men of straw, says Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Shakespeare "impresses on us the conviction—or, rather, he leaves us no room for anything but the conviction—that Heaven has taken charge over the work of retribution ; and the process of retribution is made the more imposing as its agents are seen in themselves to be naught."[20] What Virgil too seeks to impress on his reader is that the raising of Rome is preeminently a work of divine charge.

That this process may be the more imposing, not only is Aeneas shaded and flattened down ; he is, on one occasion at least, even made to appear comic—as comic, perhaps, as that " Ridiculus Mus " which, says Horace,

20. " Shakespeare's Workmanship," p. 65.

comes to birth when words with the purport of " Arma virumque cano " begin an epic. What is Aeneas but comic when he gravely introduces himself to Venus with these words?

> Sum pius Aeneas, raptos qui ex hoste penatis
> Classe veho mecum, fama super aethera notus.[21]

Among those who have noted this symphony of silly sound is Dr. E. M. W. Tillyard. But has he not missed the point when he elaborately proceeds, as he does in " Poetry Direct And Oblique, "[22] to impute this to an unhappy attempt on Virgil's part at imitating Homer? In Homer's passage, which Dr. Tillyard quotes, Odysseus reveals himself, in the court of King Alcinous, to an audience who, whilst having heard the fame of Odysseus, did not know, until he told them, that their guest was Odysseus. How wide of this is the trend of Virgil's passage, when he makes Aeneas introduce himself, in language which recalls, no doubt, the words of Odysseus, but to one who knows him through and through, knows him better than he knows himself—to his goddess mother, " Aeneadum genatrix hominum divumque voluptas "! Dr. Tillyard deems this " damaging to the derived passage." In comparison with Homer's " thunderbolt," he says, " Virgil's squib sputters feebly at the wrong moment." Of course it does. And it is just what Virgil wants it to do. For both squib and moment are as he has contrived them. When we hear the words of Odysseus, we hear them as the court of Alcinous heard them; and we acclaim them 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, at this stage of the story, against the pathos that waits to wring him in Book IV. So prepared and controlled, so swayed of the laughing gods, we should be able, under their yoke, to join a smile with the sighs we heave over the tragedy of this Love-born man duteously renouncing love and heroically harrowing the soul of his beloved.

" One must take it in a sweep,"[23] says Belloc of " Paradise Lost." That is the epic of a Fall, as " Paradise Regained " is the epic of a Rise. The Aeneid compasses both the one and the other. It is " Ilion falling, Rome arising." Besides the doubleness of action, its movement is in a twi-tending, eccentric sweep as vast as the sweep of a comet through unsounded depths of space. First is the tremendous trajectory of Ilion falling; and it is a dramatic setting of liquid love the poet chooses for the pronouncing of the

21. Aeneid I, 378 and 379.

22. Chatto and Windus (1934), pp. 188 and 189. The 1945 edition omits this whole passage.

23. "Milton," by Hilaire Belloc, Cassel & Co., Ltd. (1935), p. 249.

colossal crash. The banquet is over in Dido's hall. She has poured a libation and pledged the Trojan guests. But deep draughts of a deadlier vintage than those Tyrian wine-jars may know have drowned her head and fired her heart. Into this high noon of star-lit Libyan night breaks, in the utterance of one from the dead, the word of doom:

> Hostis habet muros; ruit alto a culmine Troia.[24]

This marks the utmost reach in the parabolic sweep of Ilion falling. At the end of Book IV, when Aeneas has made his choice, the movement has already swung round. It is not that fate has failed; the law of gravitation persists. But the choice of Aeneas, " fato profugus " still, has reversed the direction so that now it heads for the glitter of perihelion. His sail is set; his Dido is dead; " another Argo's painted prow " drives across the Middle Sea. Right on, till the end of the Aeneid, it is now the resplendent sweep of Rome arising.

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24. Aeneid II, 290.