

# Dido's Long Dying

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... sic fata gradus evaserat altos,  
semianimemque sinu germanam amplexa fovebat  
cum gemitu atque atros siccabat veste cruores.  
illa gravis oculos conata attollere rursus  
deficit; infixum stridit sub pectore vulnus.  
ter sese attollens cubitoque adnixa levavit,  
ter revoluta toro est oculisque errantibus alto  
quaesivit caelo lucem ingemuitque reperta.  
Tum Iuno omnipotens longum miserata dolorem  
difficilisque obitus Irim demisit Olympo  
quae luctantem animam nexosque resolveret artus.  
nam quia nec fato merita nec morte peribat,  
sed misera ante diem subitoque accensa furore,  
nondum illi flavum Proserpina vertice crinem  
abstulerat Stygioque caput damnaverat Orco.  
ergo Iris croceis per caelum roscida pennis  
mille trahens varios adverso sole colores  
devolat et supra caput astitit. 'hunc ego Diti  
sacrum iussa fero teque isto corpore solvo':  
sic ait et dextra crinem secat, omnis et una  
dilapsus calor atque in ventos vita recessit.

—Virgil, *Aeneid*, book 4: lines 685–705

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This said, she [Anna] mounts the pile with  
eager haste,  
And in her arms the gasping Queen  
embraced;  
Her temples chafed, and her own  
garments tore  
To stanch the streaming blood and  
cleanse the gore.  
Thrice oped her heavy eyes and saw the light,  
But having found it, sickened at the sight,  
And closed her lids at last in endless night.  
Then Juno, grieving that she should sustain  
A death so lingering and so full of pain,  
Sent Iris down to free her from the strife  
Of labouring nature and dissolve her life.  
For since she died, not doomed by  
Heaven's decree,  
Of her own crime, but human casualty  
And rage of love, that plunged her in despair,  
The sisters had not cut the topmost hair  
Which Proserpine and they can only know,  
Nor made her sacred to the shades below.  
Downward the various goddess took  
her flight,  
And drew a thousand colours from the light;  
Then stood above the dying lover's head,  
And said, "I thus devote thee to the dead:  
This offering to the infernal gods I bear."  
Thus while she spoke she cut the fatal hair,  
The struggling soul was loosed, and life  
dissolved in air.

—English translation of Virgil,  
by John Dryden (1697)

In handbooks devoted to the history of Western literature, Virgil's *Aeneid* is usually bracketed between Homer's two masterpieces, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and Dante's *Divina Comedia* as a milestone in the development of the epic. It is the Latin bridge between the literature of

ancient Greece and the evolution of vernacular exemplars of the genre in late-medieval and Renaissance Italy and beyond. From there we move, in English, from the work of Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Hardy, among others, to Derek Walcott's splendid *Omeros*, which, for twenty-first-century readers, brings to completion a millennial cycle of accomplishments in the form.

What Virgil adds to Homer could be briefly put as an expanded sense of historical development, of ethnic and political diversity, and of the ethics expected to be emulated by the powerful figures destined to be the major protagonists in Rome's march to empire. Our poet extends the Homeric prototypes so that we have a novel mixture of the *Iliad*, with its battling before the walls of Troy, and the *Odyssey*, an adventure-filled journey of return to island home and family. As an amalgamation, the *Aeneid* in fact draws throughout its full course on both earlier epics to fashion its own particular version of a voyage of discovery, from Troy in ruins to the shores of Italy, to the site of Rome, and to the golden age of Augustus – in the far distance for the poem's chief protagonist, Aeneas, but contemporary for Virgil and his readers.

As the hero pursues his fated path, we follow a route dotted by extraordinary occurrences, such as his dalliance with Dido, or his venture into the Underworld, with the Cumaean Sibyl as guide, to visit his father and learn something of what lies ahead for himself and for his progeny, with their unprecedented sweep of achievements projected through time. Homer has little that suggests this notion of a thousand-year development, of a fated progress that ends with one of the West's grandest cultural statements.

Nor does Homer more than suggest the patterns of behavior open to a hero who bears the spiritual burden of Rome's fu-

ture greatness while he literally carries his father on his shoulders and leads his son by the hand out of the smoldering remains of Troy. A major aspect of the ethics that should dictate how to use the omnipotence that follows in the aftermath of victorious conquest is put to Aeneas by his father, Anchises, at the end of their meeting in the land of the dead. Apostrophizing him as *Romane*, and therefore as prototype and paragon of his future race, he outlines by précis the nub of what Rome's greatest talent will accomplish. It will be not for achievements in bronze or stone sculpture, not for skill at oratory or in astronomy that his people will boast in due course. Roman artistry lies elsewhere:

tu regere imperio populos, Romane,  
memento  
(hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere  
morem,  
parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.  
(*Aeneid*, book 6: lines 851 – 853)

Remember, Roman, to rule peoples with might (these will be your arts), to impose [upon them] a custom for peace, to spare the humbled and war down the proud.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Roman aesthetic or intellectual accomplishment will not lie in tangible works of art, or even in rhetoric's persuasive abilities or in the authority that derives from cataloguing the heavens. It will come from something both less and more tangible: from a dynamic form of political astuteness dedicated especially to a morality of restraint in dealing with those vulnerable to a conqueror's force.

In the verses before addressing these abstract dicta to his son, Anchises calls our attention to a concrete instance where sparing the subjugated should be exemplary in future Roman behavior. In the parade of Roman greats whose ghosts knowing father catalogues for ignorant son, the patriarch in conclusion apostrophizes

two, Caesar and Pompey, father-in-law and son-in-law, who challenge each other in the penultimate phase of the lengthy civil war that preceded the Augustan peace. The prayer, addressed specifically to Caesar whom the myth of the Julian gens claimed as Anchises's linear descendant, asks him to practice moderation in pursuit of war, which is to say, in practical terms, to spare by ridding himself of the weapons that the victor might be tempted to misuse. Restraint seems particularly imperative when brother is fighting brother and when the fatherland (*patria*), the abstract body politic that protects all, is the ultimate victim. In actuality, this period of fighting only ended when first Pompey and then Caesar were murdered.

Instances of moderation dot the epic's text. In book 2, Venus prevents angry Aeneas from killing Helen in revenge for the suffering she has caused, and in book 9, Apollo orders Aeneas's son, Ascanius/Iulus, to forbear from further slaughter lest he bring retaliation in turn upon himself. But, in this context, the example that most troubles the reader, with purpose on Virgil's part, is the very conclusion of the poem, where Aeneas, "set aflame by furies and terrifying in his anger," kills his suppliant opponent, Turnus, who is on his knees, hand outstretched, craving mercy. None is forthcoming.<sup>2</sup>

With this background in mind, I would like to turn to the specific event in the *Aeneid* that has had the deepest effect on later artists, namely the death of Dido, to whom Virgil devotes the fourth book of his poem. Other individual scenes in the epic have captured the imaginations of future generations – I think, for instance, of Aeneas and the Sibyl, or of Turnus's death – but none has moved readers as deeply and consistently as the sequence of occurrences associated with the love between Trojan prince and Carthaginian

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queen, events that culminate in her suicide. The story of Dido has exerted a profound influence on Western literature, from Virgil's younger contemporary Ovid, in the seventh of his *Heroides*, to the recent poetry of Louise Glück. Its potency is felt in music, in masterpieces such as Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Hector Berlioz's *Les Troyens*. And various scenes from book 4 have elicited powerful depictions from painters as diverse as Claude Lorrain, Tiepolo, Reynolds, and Turner.

The paradox remains that the tragedy as it evolves is built on Aeneas's forced renunciation of private passion in order to embrace the impersonal destiny that fate has cast his way. The ending of the poem suggests that the titular hero could act quite differently from how he behaves toward Dido. From one angle of interpretation, the poem's conclusion is discomfiting because Aeneas gives in to personal emotion when he should least do so, which is to say, at a crucial turn of events where he should function as a model of forbearance and where Virgil's text itself, at its finale and climax, should most serve a didactic purpose, for us as well as for its initial readers. We leave the poem having just witnessed, for a final time, how the specifics of human emotionality are ever at odds with more general, idealizing aspirations. We hope for a cathartic display of mercy through an act of pardon, a scenario similar to the conclusion of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Virgil fails to gratify our wishes, leaving us for contemplation only a manifestation of rage leading to a violent killing. His lesson reinforces a constant in the chronicle of human history, that revenge regularly breeds further revenge.

Though in book 4 Aeneas suppresses his feelings in favor of an impersonal calling, Dido, by contrast, turns her own deep sensibility first verbally against her absconding lover, then physically against herself as she resorts to suicide, so as to end all

feeling. It is in projecting her road to death that Virgil's virtuosity is most apparent. Here, his text has had its profoundest influence on later artists, and it is where I felt its power most when I first read the poem's twelve books in Latin as an undergraduate in college. I would like to devote the remainder of this essay to watching closely a few of the ways by which the text works its magic upon us. I am interested in particular in the means by which the poet extends the time-span of Dido's suffering so as gradually to draw the reader into close sympathy with her circumstances. There is no better way to trace a master poet's maneuvers than by looking intently at his words and their deployment. Here, as regularly, only a close examination of the original language will do justice to the artist's craft and inventiveness.

Let us begin as we find Dido and Aeneas sharing a banquet she has prepared for her royal guest:

nec non et vario noctem sermone trahebat  
infelix Dido longumque bibebat amorem, ...  
(1:748 – 749)

Ill-fated Dido also was stretching out the night with varied conversation and drinking in love at length...

As we turn from literal drinking to metaphorical, we move from wine to the implicit poison her love for Aeneas portends. The double use of the imperfect tense not only implies temporal continuity, the echo of *trahebat* in *bibebat* also connects the words themselves with love's lengthening over time. And indeed, as the queen listens to the tale of her guest's adventures during and after the fall of Troy, a recitation that takes up the epic's second and third books, her love only deepens.

As we reach book 4 and return to the narrative proper, Virgil changes the metaphor from poison to wound and flame,

while still reminding us of time's extent as a marked feature of his presentation:

At regina gravi iam dudum saucia cura  
vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni.  
(4:1–2)

But the queen, for a long time now wounded with grievous suffering, nourishes the wound with her veins and is the prey of hidden fire.

But it is only at lines 169 to 172, with an authorial intervention in the narrative, that we begin to realize to the full Virgil's intent of figuratively dilating the duration of the queen's agony:

ille dies primus leti primusque malorum  
causa fuit; neque enim specie famave  
movetur  
nec iam furtivum Dido meditatur amorem:  
coniugium vocat, hoc praetexit nomine  
culpam. (4:169–172)

That was the first day of death and the first to be the source of evil; for Dido is not moved by appearance or repute nor does she now ponder a hidden love. She calls it marriage and with this label veils her blame.

The demonstrative *hoc* brings home the fact that the narrator is commenting on the action, presenting its meaning directly to us, but it is especially the initial phrase, *ille dies primus leti*, that captures our attention as we follow out Dido's emotional history to its conclusion. One of our finest Virgilian scholars, Roland Austin, minimizes the effect of *primus* here by making it adverbial (he translates: "That day in the beginning was the cause of death, that day in the beginning was the cause of sorrow").<sup>3</sup> But such a reading tends to diminish the horror of Virgil's implication that Dido's dying takes place over a stretch of time. We have been prepared for this by the earlier metaphoric implications of poison, wound, and fire. We are now wit-

nessing the commencement of the death that will ultimately come about from their imminence.

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As the plot progresses, Virgil uses figuration regularly to draw the reader into Dido's emotional world. Let me offer one salient example. At line 401, the narrator, in an unusual gesture within what is ordinarily third-person delivery, addresses us in the second person. We are asked in our mind's eye, as individual students of Virgil's text, to imagine beholding the Trojans as they flee Carthage:

migrantis cernas totaque ex urbe ruentis: . . .

you might observe them moving away and hurrying from the whole city.

And, with only the intervention of a simile, that "you" shortly becomes Dido herself:

quis tibi tum, Dido, cernenti talia sensus,  
quosve dabas gemitus, cum litora fervere late  
prospiceres arce ex summa, totumque  
videres  
misceri ante oculos tantis clamoribus  
aequor! (4:408–411)

What feelings were yours then, Dido, observing such things, or what groans did you keep uttering when you looked out from the top of the citadel at the beach swarming far and wide, and saw before your eyes the whole sea swirling with such great shouts!

The apostrophe to Dido makes her present before our eyes. By the magic of figuration we are at Carthage, watching her as she watches the Trojans departing. We hear the noise ("such great shouts") that she apprehends. But by the focused repetition of *cernas* in *cernenti*, Virgil would have us for a brief stretch of time actually become the grieving lover as she views Aeneas and his colleagues set sail on their way to Rome. It is hard to imagine great sympathy being elicited more magisterially by verbal means.

*Dido's Long Dying* But, if we have been witnessing her death over the length of four books of an epic, Dido's actual moment of dying is itself also powerfully protracted in its exposition. Take the word *vulnus* (wound), for instance. It occurs in the singular earlier in book 4 at lines 2 and 67, as metaphor for her love's destructive aspect. When she actually stabs herself with Aeneas's sword on her funeral pyre, Virgil turns singular to plural (*vulnera* [4:683]). Literal wounds have now been added to a single, metaphorical hurt, forcing us to contemplate the arc of this very development as one type of suffering leads to, and is piled upon, another during the approach of death.

Virgil employs a complementary technique shortly after as the goddess Juno at last frees her suffering devotee from the body's trammels:

Tum Iuno omnipotens longum miserata  
dolorem  
difficilisque obitus Irim demisit Olympo  
quae luctantem animam nexosque  
resolveret artus. (4:693 – 695)

Then almighty Juno, taking pity on her long grief and difficult dying sent Iris down from Olympus to undo her struggling spirit and entangled limbs.

Let me point out two details in this extraordinary resolution of life into death. The first is the echo of *longum amorem*, whose poison we have seen Dido drink in book 1 when the banquet's literal wine becomes the venom of destructive, extensive passion. Long love now yields place to *longum dolorem*, the grief brought about by unreciprocated passion over time that both complements and then becomes the pain of a prolonged demise. We have followed this metamorphosis from book 1 to the end of book 4, engaging with the anguish of the queen during the transmutation of metaphoric wound into literal.

A second detail is the striking phrase *difficilis obitus*. It has been a subject of debate by students of Virgil as to why the poet chooses to use a plural, "difficult deaths," instead of the more straightforward singular to describe Dido's passing. In his commentary on the phrase, Austin feels that the plural here may be "'intensive', marking the slow agony of Dido's death, the tortured moments one by one," but then underestimates the force of his insight as "highly subjective."<sup>4</sup> Surely, however, he is absolutely correct and his judgment should be expanded. Through a single word we endure the final minutes of Dido's drawn-out passage from life to death, hurt by hurt, grief by grief, with mental pain combined with physical in a concatenation of suffering.

But Dido's final instants are but part of the larger history of dying. Her death began for the reader long ago, with the poisoned draught of love and with *ille dies primus leti*, the day when the lovers consummate their desire. In the case of Dido, death is implicit in love and marks its beginning. And it is a sign of Virgil's virtuosity not only to spread this aspect of her tale out over narrative time, but also to give it particular concentration at the actual moment of her demise, where the plural *obitus* implies a multitude of deaths both now and in the past.

Her deaths stay with us throughout the rest of the poem.<sup>5</sup> When Aeneas meets Dido's ghost in the Underworld, it is of her *dolor* (6:464) at his departure that his words tell. Or, for another example, Virgil opens the poem's eleventh book by repeating a line from book 4 that introduces the tragic hunt and storm:

Oceanum interea surgens Aurora reliquit: ...  
(4:129)

Meanwhile the rising Dawn had left the Ocean ...

This repetition is tantamount to advising the reader that he should sense a connection between Dido's passing and the burgeoning war in Latium. The poet suggests a reason for such a link some seventy lines later, when Aeneas prepares the body of the dead youth Pallas for burial:

tum geminas vestis auroque ostroque rigentis  
extulit Aeneas, quas illi laeta laborum  
ipsa suis quondam manibus Sidonia Dido  
fecerat et tenui telas discreverat auro.  
harum unam iuveni supremum maestus  
honorem  
induit arsurasque comas obnubit amictu.  
(11:72 – 77)

Then Aeneas took out twin clothes, stiff with gold and purple, which Dido of Sidon, happy with her efforts, had herself once made for him with her own hands and had interspersed the texture with gold. In sadness with one of these, as a final honor, he clothes the youth and veils his locks, soon to burn, with the shroud.

The reader is left to surmise why Dido is so prominently recalled to memory before the funeral of Aeneas's young protégé. But Virgil implies at least one answer at the very end of the poem. There we learn that the hero's *dolor*, his grief and resentment at the death of Pallas, is what finally spurs him to kill Turnus, his suppliant antagonist who had earlier killed the youth in hand-to-hand combat. Passion is again the spur to action, even against a humbled foe. The chief difference with the death of Dido is that now the hero himself kills, rather than simply serving as the indirect cause of suicide.

And, finally, there is Turnus himself. His name initiates the epic's final, longest book, just as the departure of his life to the shades brings it to a conclusion. He, not Aeneas, claims the poetry's cycle. At the opening, Virgil brings him before us with a startling simile that likens him to a

lion stricken by hunters, one of whom is called a *latro*, a robber. I quote the initial lines of the comparison:

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...Poenorum qualis in arvis  
saucius ille gravi venantum vulnere pectus  
tum demum movet arma leo, ... (12:4 – 6)

...just as in the fields of the Poeni that lion, wounded in his chest by hunters' grievous wound, then at last advances to battle ...

The demonstrative *ille* points our eye at this special animal, and the particularity continues in several other ways.<sup>6</sup> The lion is placed in the territory of the Carthaginians (*Poeni*). The creature's uniqueness becomes still more distinctive by means of the poet's careful reminiscence of the opening lines of book 4, quoted earlier:

At regina gravi iamdudum saucia cura  
vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni.

This is no ordinary human lion whose habitat is Carthage, but one who stands as direct surrogate for Dido. The epic's final book, as we have seen, begins and ends with Turnus, not with the titular hero. It also carefully imitates the progress we have traced in book 4 from metaphorical to literal wound. There, Dido endures both the pain of unrequited love and the self-inflicted wound of her suicide. In book 12, Aeneas engenders the figurative hurt by robbing Turnus of Lavinia, to whom he considers himself betrothed. He also perpetrates the final wounding of Turnus as the epic comes to its dramatic, unrelieved conclusion. So Dido's long dying continues after her own death in book 4, carefully extended by the poet's genius. We are reminded literally of it in book 6, when Aeneas meets her ghost, "Phoenician Dido with her wound still fresh" (*Phoenissa recens a vulnere Dido* [6:450]). But, as we have seen, her presence symbolically complements the deaths of

*Dido's Long Dying* both Pallas and Turnus, which are in turn strategically intertwined.

So the influence of Dido permeates the action of the epic long after her own passing and until the very moment of its conclusion. It is this influence that has reached out to all sensitive readers of the poem and has made its mark on literature and the fine arts ever since. There is no better way to experience her hurt over the imagination's time than by listening

to her dying words as conveyed by commanding composers like Purcell and Berlioz, the latter a lover of Virgil from his youth. In "When I am laid, am laid, in earth" and in "*Ah, je vais mourir*," music's extent in briefer, more trenchant compass, movingly echoes the sorrow that Virgil, over a stretch of epic narrative, has so brilliantly conveyed to us in perhaps the most affecting portrayal of his final masterpiece.

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent *Aeneid* translations, unless otherwise noted, by the author.
- <sup>2</sup> As he prepares to kill Turnus, Aeneas is *furiis accensus et ira / terribilis* ("set aflame by furies and terrifying in his anger" [*Aeneid*, book 12: lines 946–947]). The language deliberately recalls two moments in book 4. In the first, Dido describes herself before her suicide: *heu furiis incensa feror* ("Alas, I am borne along, set afire by furies" [4:376]). On the second occasion, as we have seen, the narrator remarks that, as she prepared for the moment of self-slaughter, she was *subito . . . accensa furore* (literally: "set aflame by sudden fury" [4:697]). In the end, the poet has Aeneas emulate Dido rather than Anchises by choosing passion over self-control, immediate human feeling over the restraint asked of Rome to come.
- <sup>3</sup> R. G. Austin, ed., *P. Vergili Maronis: Aeneidos: Liber Quartus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 69 (on *Aeneid*, 4:169f). Dido's delay before leaving her room to share in the day's hunt is one of several great moments of hesitation that dot the epic (*cunctantem* [4:133]). We think also of the golden bough's reluctance to be plucked by Aeneas (6:211) and of the hero's own moment of pause before killing Turnus (12:940). Dido's delay in its own way further stretches out the duration of her dying.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 199 (on *Aeneid*, 4:694).
- <sup>5</sup> Damien Nelis rightly pointed out to me that the "sad foreboding" (*triste augurium* [5:7]), which the departing Trojans sense as they look back at the flames emanating from Carthage, suggests that we will often return to thoughts of Dido and her death as the epic progresses.
- <sup>6</sup> The term *deictic* is appropriately applied to *ille* by T. E. Page in his comment on the word. See T. E. Page, ed., *The Aeneid of Virgil: Books VII–XII* (London: Macmillan, 1929), 413 (on *Aeneid*, 12:5).