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Echoes of Dido: Literary Transformations From Virgil to Marlowe and Nash

Palak Motsara[1*]

[1*]MPhil Research Scholar, University of Delhi, Palak.motsara100@gmail.com

Abstract
The paper would critically study Virgil's epic poem *The Aeneid* and Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nash's play *Dido, Queen of Carthage* in order to understand the manner in which Dido's character is represented by Virgil and later resurrected by the English playwrights. The study would involve a careful investigation into how and why Marlowe and Nash's text, which depends on its literary predecessor for the plot line, differs from it. With the emergence of these differences between the two texts, the epic tradition, the classical text by Virgil and several other themes that *The Aeneid* evokes shall stand challenged. Lastly, one would witness the powerful effects of this resurrection as gender, desire and power collide in these texts through the central character of the queen of Carthage, Dido.
The paper would begin by critically studying the way Virgil constructs and writes Dido's character in his epic poem *The Aeneid*. In order to completely understand the implications of this characterisation, it will also be imperative to study Virgil's Aeneas, especially as represented in Books I, II, and IV of *The Aeneid*. Once a preliminary critical analysis has been done, the paper would move onto Marlowe and Nash's play *Dido, Queen of Carthage* by analysing the play on the basis of its characterisation, style of writing and its departures from Virgil's epic. From this point onwards, the paper will move back and forth between the two texts, critically studying the implications of these differences and the diverse issues that these might raise for the contemporary readers.

The 'Pious' and the 'Tragic' in Virgil: Investigating *The Aeneid*[1]

The Aeneid charts the epic journey of a man who battles the wrath of Gods, a strong opposition from enemy empires and rulers and time itself as he struggles to reach "there where Fate holds out a homeland, calm, at peace" (*The Aeneid* 66). Aeneas is the Virgilian hero on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of finding a new home for the dispossessed Trojans. He is the pious hero who will ensure the patrilineal Trojan survival that forms the basis of Roman cultural origins, something which Anchises' ghost keeps reminding him of; the dead and the buried eagerly waiting to "rejoice with me in Italy, found at last" (*The Aeneid* 214).
The idea of Rome, the land that Aeneas and his successors would come to represent, is a holy establishment whose cornerstones are constructed from a strict moral code and rest on the family cult. When such values and beliefs drive the hero, who is preoccupied with the cause of empire-building, desire, passion or Eros cannot exist within the same framework.
Thus, his encounter and affair with Dido have no scope of ever materialising into a relationship that can be a part of Roman history. Their relationship, built on free will and desire for one another, runs contrary to the sober, just and holy man that Aeneas has been 'prophesied' to become. As Page duBois correctly observes in "THE φαρμακός OF VIRGIL: DIDO AS SCAPEGOAT":

> The affair is obstructive to the real mission of the empire-building hero. He is to move ever forward until he reaches the banks of the Tiber. Dido is his Circe, a seductress whose erotic powers cause the hero to delay and divert him from his linear progress toward the establishment of the new civilization which will bring peace, prosperity, finally, Augustus, to a chaotic world. (21)

Aeneas cannot afford to stay at Carthage, though he himself wishes to do so at one point in the text. He 'desires' for a future more glorious than the one that Dido seems to offer him. Moreover, even though it is Aeneas who has the upper hand in their amorous relationship, the political reality of their relationship is of the opposite nature. Dido holds the position of the masculine ruler, it is *her* land and Aeneas is the one who seeks a shelter under her reign. It emerges as a mockery of his destined role— the one who was promised his own land has to live under the grace of another. Dido then takes on the role of Aeneas and his future identity as the founder of an empire gets subsumed under her identity.
In such a situation, it becomes imperative to "expel, cast out, burn" the "otherness of Aeneas, an evil which has affected and infected him within" that Dido comes to represents (duBois 18). duBois also gives striking historical (speculative) evidence as to why this discarding of the queen is necessary so that the Roman empire emerges purged of any influences that she might have had onto it, through Aeneas. Dido and Aeneas do not marry (in the legal sense of the term) but she nonetheless believes them to be man and wife spiritually. Thus, in crude terms, she might be viewed as an adulteress. duBois notes how:

> among Augustus' plans for the righting of the empire were moral reforms, the strengthening of the marriage laws… Although the institution of the laws defending marriage came later in his rule, Augustus must have, in Virgil's lifetime, evinced concern for these problems. Dido is an adulteress, a widow who lives with a man without marriage, and without producing an heir.

[1] As mentioned earlier, only Books I, II, & IV would be the objects of study and not the entire epic since these are the books that focus on (and lead to) the relationship between Dido and Aeneas.

Augustus punished his daughter Julia for adultery, banished her from Rome, from the human community, as a criminal, a kind of poison within the state. (21)

Therefore, Dido *has* to die "because what she lives for is incompatible with the ideology of Augustus, of the new Roman empire, of the patriarchal religion of Rome, capital of the world" (duBois 21). If Rome is to exist, Dido must cease to.

Elaborating on how Dido becomes a scapegoat, an object that can be discarded or abandoned when it fails to serve the empire-building masculine enterprise that drives *The Aeneid*, duBois further draws a compelling parallel between the Ovidian myth of Actaeon and the queen of Carthage. She writes:

Like Actaeon, she moves from the position of hunter to that of the hunted, from predator to prey: Dido's nature is altered, in the course of Books I through IV, from that of huntress to that of hunted animal, and finally to that of sacrificed animal. (20-21)

With the queen's death, the "passionate frenzy and immoderation, the erotic love that Dido, like a tragic heroine, acts out until her death" also perish (duBois 21). Unconsciously acting out on his father Anchises' advice that Aeneas "should shun or shoulder each ordeal that he must meet", the epic 'hero' decides to "shun" the queen's love when he can no longer "shoulder" it (*The Aeneid* 220). With Dido's death:

…a part of Aeneas, a part of the city, a part of the Roman character which can and must be externalized, given a reality outside the body, physically, geographically, spiritually, and decisively (is) rejected, if the city is to maintain its sense of itself. And the rejection involves a suppression, a refusal to recognize the real conflicts, within Aeneas, within Virgil's and Augustus' Rome. The real city can continue as a whole only if it identifies an evil without. Because of Dido's otherness, she can and must be expelled, pushed outside the walls of the city, the city which reforms itself, purified, cleansed by virtuous sacrifice, reaffirmed in its heroism, priestliness, imperialism, in its asceticism. (duBois 22-23)

As duBois refers to the suicide of Dido as a sacrifice that was necessary for an empire to rise, one cannot help but think about how Iphigenia was also sacrificed at the altar for a similar purpose— for the victory of the Grecian empire, so that it forever exists as *the* empire. And it is almost uncanny how both these women figures, Dido and Iphigenia and later even Cleopatra, are all connected not just through (the manner of) their deaths but also through the story of Troy— a symbol which one keeps coming back to, which forever looms behind like a spectre.

With Dido's death, Aeneas is freed and can now successfully tread towards his future empire. One would like to quote Helene Cixous here who makes an interesting observation regarding the relationship Aeneas seems to share with the women he has a relationship with. In *The Newly Born Woman,* she writes that Aeneas is always absolved of his careless and often misogynistic behaviour with women as "there is always a god or a cause to excuse or explain Aeneas' skill at seeding and shaking off his women, dropping them…" (Desmond 8)[2]. If one carefully ponders over what Cixous says, one realises that both Creusa and Dido die due to either Aeneas' inattentiveness or his irresponsible behaviour but for both these deaths, a divine or rational explanation is provided immediately which attempts to absolve Aeneas of any responsibility or guilt which can make the readers question his character.

Thus, Virgil's depiction of both Aeneas and Dido makes the readers interrogate the power relations that exist between these two characters, the passionate emotions and dreams that drive them and ultimately, the death of one that constructs her as *tragic* while leaving the readers to question the *pietas* that the other represents.

Marlowe and Nash's Pantomime: *Dido, Queen of Carthage*

Centuries after *The Aeneid* is *Dido, Queen of Carthage*. After reading Marlowe and Nash's play, one can best describe it as Donald Stump does: it is "Marlowe's Travesty of Virgil"[3]. *Dido, Queen of Carthage* reduces the grand to the comic, questions the epic tradition along with the quest for a creation of an empire that Virgil's epic seems obsessed with (if one may say so). The play has been described by numerous critics as being a farce where nothing sacred or serious escapes Marlowe's "savage humour"[4]. The comic or the farcical comes forth most strongly through the way Marlowe and Nash chose to represent Aeneas. Once a psychologically complex and dense personality, destined to be the founder of one of the world's 'greatest' civilisations, Aeneas in *Dido, Queen of Carthage* is stripped of his 'greatness' and "has been transformed into a deluded exile who distresses children and embarrasses his fellow soldiers" (Stump 89). His gestures lack any grace, he fails to take command, there is a deficiency of skills like leadership and/or initiative. There is also a dearth of a compelling personality, so much so that Marlowe and Nash's character is even devoid of the divine mist that surrounded Virgil's Aeneas, as he is introduced in rags that invoke laughter and not admiration at the hero's struggle.

Aeneas' position as a hero is constantly undermined by characters around him as he is questioned, mocked, ignored, and denied any central role or importance. Characters such as Iarbas find it amusing to scorn or ridicule Aeneas, not just when Aeneas is absent from the scene, but even during his presence on stage:

Iar. Why, man of Troy, do I offend thine eyes?
Or art thou griev'd thy betters press so nigh? (3.3. 17-18)

In the above-mentioned instance, Iarbus, one of Dido's most ardent suitors, ridicules Aeneas in the most offending manner possible and yet it is Dido who comes to Aeneas' rescue while the 'hero' either ignores what Iarbas says and remains silent or decides to talk to another character present on stage.

[2] Marilynn Desmond in her book *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and Medieval The Aeneid* quotes Cixous. I have taken the quote from her book and therefore, have given the reference of Desmond and not Cixous.

[3] This is not just a phrase that Stump uses but also the name of his article.

[4] Stump uses this remark by Mary Elizabeth Smith in his article.

In another instance, Aeneas decides to flee from Carthage without bidding farewell to Dido. He plans to escape without meeting the queen which can be considered as being extremely offending to a ruler who has not just saved the lives of his people but has also provided them with shelter and food. When he is caught by Dido, Aeneas pleads:

Aen. O, princely Dido, give me leave to speak
I went to take my farewell of Achates. (4.4. 17-18)

But the readers are well aware that this is a complete lie as Aeneas himself says in the preceding scene:

Aen. Trojans abourd, and I will follow you, …
To sea Aeneas, finde out Italy? (4.3. 45,56)

This occurrence proves to be one of the most blatant and unapologetic attacks that the playwrights employ against Virgil's pious Aeneas. While Aeneas not just behaves in an extremely callous and casual manner, he even momentarily forgets about his son Ascanius as he cries for the Trojans to set sails for Italy. A number of such instances are present in abundance throughout the play.

Thus, Marlowe and Nash most definitely reduced Aeneas' position as a historical and legendary character in the Roman civilisation to a caricature of the same, as the 'Trojan exile' becomes an exemplary example of everything that stands in opposition to bravery, chivalry, honesty, ethicality and nobility. Stump 'suspects' that:

Marlowe's point here is something simpler. He means to debunk Aeneas, and with him, Virgil's project to glorify the founding of the Roman Empire. (90)

Having discussed the way Marlowe and Nash's Aeneas differs from that of Virgil's, one would now like to move onto the character of Dido. While some of the grace and serenity that possessed Virgil's Dido is retained, the queen is also reduced to a hasty and impulsive woman who is trapped between the whims of the divine forces and her own desires. Dido oscillates between extremes: hate and love, attraction and repulsion, avenging and absolving as she desperately attempts to navigate through the divine schemes that rule her life. Her confused and unstable behaviour is mostly evident in her conversations with Iarbas. A critical look at a few instances would further prove this point:

Iar. Come, Dido, leave Ascanius, let us walk.
Dido. Go thou away, Ascanius shall stay.
Iar. Ungentle queen! is this thy love to me?
Dido. O stay, Iarbas, and I'll go with thee. (3.1. 34-37)
Iar. Iarbas, die, seeing she abandons thee.
Dido. No; live Iarbas: what hast thou deserv'd,
That I should say thou art no love of mine?
Something thou hast deserv'd. Away, I say;
Depart from Carthage— come not in my sight.
Iar. Am I not king of rich Getulia?
Dido. Iarbas, pardon me, and stay awhile…
Dido. What tell'st thou me of rich Getulia?
Am not I queen of Lybia? then depart. (3.1. 40-46, 48-49)

Through these exchanges between Iarbas and Dido, the latter's beforementioned unstable behaviour and personality type is evident. Where Virgil's Dido was composed and dignified, the Elizabethan playwrights' Dido is anything but that. Her character is comically exaggerated and readers are meant to laugh at her, all the while pitying her for her tragic fate.

But, despite these differences in representation and characterisation, one must not overlook the crucial implications that the play holds for its readers. As Desmond notes, the act of focusing on the story of Dido herself, even at times at the expense of or 'exclusion' of Aeneas marks an important and "discernible tradition in the medieval vernacular adaptation of *The Aeneid*" (2). She further observes how:

For vernacular readers from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, reading Dido—that is, thematizing Dido's story (sometimes only momentarily) as the central plot of the Virgilian text— constitutes a visible response to the Aeneid story. By displacing the epic hero Aeneas, the tradition of reading Dido disrupts the patrilineal focus of *The Aeneid* as an imperial foundation narrative. (2)

In addition to that, while both Aeneas and Dido have been comical reworkings of their originals, it is only Dido in whose character the tragic strain is not undone by the comic; rather one feels that it has only heightened in its effects. In and through her desperation and confusion, her utter helplessness at Aeneas' desertion comes forth; one might laugh at her inconsistent moods but her impending death always lurks behind each act, each scene, and each line.

Most importantly, taking from what Desmond observes a few lines earlier, Marlowe and Nash's play ends with Dido's self-immolation[5]. The image of Dido's flesh burning, her body abandoned and discarded, is left with the readers and audience alike. Her body becomes an interesting metaphor here, as something which always remains in the possession of the masculine. From the moment Aeneas sets eyes on her, her body begins belonging to his masculine gaze and authority:

Ilio. Look where she comes: Aeneas, view her well.
Aen. Well may I view her, but she sees not me. (2. 1. 72-73)

Later, as Venus is discoursing to Cupid on why must they make Dido fall for Aeneas, she says:

Ven. That she may dote upon Aeneas' love,
And by that means repair his broken ships,
Victual his soldiers, give him wealthy gifts. And he, at last, depart to Italy… (2. 1. 326-29)

[5] It is not just Dido's self-immolation. In a ludicrous manner, both Iarbas and Anna throw themselves in the pyre too.

And lastly, Cupid at one point says, "Then shall I touch her breast and conquer her". Thus, through these instances, one realises the way the female body is exploited for masculine endeavours such as building the Roman empire, wherein the value of the female body is reduced to being a mere stepping stone for achieving something 'greater' and beyond that. Dido's body and her political 'body', both belong to Aeneas' quest for finding/departing to Italy. Offering herself as his sanctum, "in mine arms make thy Italy", Dido never fathomed that soon all of her will be engulfed in this deluge. Her presence is merely to necessitate Aeneas' journey forward, something that one has already discussed before. She becomes the deer itself that Aeneas and Dido went hunting for; once being the saviour of the very cause that'll completely eradicate her from the face of the earth:
Acha. As I remember, here you shot the deer
That sav'd your famish'd soldiers' lives from death (3. 3. 51-52)

An ironic statement made by Aeneas himself must be mentioned:
Aen. Yea, all my navy split with rocks and shelves;
Nor stern nor anchor have our maimed fleet;
Our masts the furious winds struck overboard:
Which piteous wants if Dido will supply,
We will account her *author of our lives* (emphasis mine). (3. 1. 10-14)
Aeneas calls her the "author" of the Trojans' lives. Yet, it is her body and her land (Carthage) that becomes *one* of the many texts upon which Roman history has been violently written, without any consent. Thus, upon Dido's body Aeneas writes his political and cultural discourse and this is the reason why I read the act of self-immolation as Dido's final and pathetic attempt to subvert this subjugation of the masculine as she flings herself into the fire, burning the very manuscript that she was reduced to, something that once Virgil tried to do too.
Having discussed the character of Dido in its entirety, one believes that a few comments must also be made regarding the way English playwrights during the Elizabethan and Jacobean period treated the figure of the female ruler. If one may say so, female rulers were forever expected to prove their proficiency in an already always masculine domain of the political. John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*[6] has the central character of the Duchess who is castigated for expressing her desire and attempting to inhabit the public and the private sphere at the same time. The Duchess' 'bio-politic' and the 'bio-natural' collide with each other, causing her to be, again, sacrificed at the altars of the masculine state machinery. Similarly, Marlowe and Nash keep introducing little dialogues that hint at how Dido might be failing as a *ruler*, the more she embraces the role of the *lover*. The impulsive sentencing of her subjects to 'prison' or "commanding" her guards to slay those citizens who might "repine thereat" increasingly expose her neurotic and erratic behaviour, making her subject to critique from not just the characters but the readers as well.
Thus, it almost seems like women who make choices and express their desire freely are reprimanded by the state and the people for their transgression. Both Dido and the Duchess die at the end of their respective plays. No matter how 'virtuous' and how 'true' they might be, they stand at a loss before the masculine law that governs their world.

Conclusion
Therefore, the resurrection of Dido by Marlowe and Nash in *Dido, Queen of Carthage* raises these important questions and ideas regarding the position of the female in a masculine world that only recognises her as either a daughter, a wife, a mother or a whore. It furthers challenges the readers to question the epic tradition and the manner in which it treats women because, as Desmond significantly brings to one's attention:
To overlook or to ignore this cultural paradigm of imperial power in relation to gender, or to fail to appreciate the significance of the pattern of substitution (Creusa—Dido— Lavinia), is to participate in a cultural silencing best characterized by Christine Froula: "Metaphysically, the woman reader of a literary tradition that inscribes violence against women is an abused daughter. Like physical abuse, literary violence against women works to privilege the cultural father's voice and story over those of women, the cultural daughters, and indeed to silence women's voices. (12)
Finally, as W. R. Johnson says, *The Aeneid* is a "polycentric" text and that "every reader will find the centre that suits him or her", I find myself constantly going back to Dido, whose cries I still cannot escape and which perhaps I will always keep alive through my words.

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[6] Although Webster's age is the Jacobean age, yet one finds interesting parallels between these two figures- Dido and the Duchess. In addition to that, queen Elizabeth has deliberately been left out of this discussion as one doesn't believe she would fit into the scheme of the argument.

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