

AENEID¹

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In Book 6 of the *Aeneid* the hero, before entering the Underworld, undergoes several preliminary, more or less "initiatory" experiences. One of these is his examination of the scenes depicted on the doors of the temple of Apollo at Cumae (allegedly built by Daedalus: *Aen.* 6.18-19). On these doors Daedalus had depicted events from his own experiences on Crete, including (most importantly for this paper) the passion of Queen Pasiphae for the bull of Minos, the monstrous hybrid offspring of that union (the Minotaur), and the intricate Labyrinth (*inextricabilis error*, 6.27) in which the Minotaur was kept hidden.

At this point, we may ask: Why, at this stage of the poem, did Vergil include these particular episodes from the rather shocking early history of Crete? As regards the Labyrinth, it seems fairly certain that it symbolizes, and foreshadows, the Underworld which Aeneas is about to enter (Otis 1964:284), but what of Pasiphae? Her shameful bestiality, and its aftermath, are described in lurid terms, and in some detail:

hic crudelis amor tauri suppostaque furto
Pasiphae mixtumque genus prolesque biformis
Minotaurus inest, Veneris monumenta nefandae;
hic labor ille domus et inextricabilis error;
magnum reginae sed enim miseratus amorem
Daedalus ipse dolos tecti ambagesque resolvit,
caeca regens filo vestigia.

(6.24-30)

"Here was (to be seen) the savage passion for the bull, and Pasiphae mated (with it), and her cross-breed hybrid offspring the Minotaur - memorial to an abominable passion; here was the laboriously-wrought building, the tangled maze; but Daedalus himself, in pity for the queens's great love, unravelled the tricky windings of the edifice, directing steps in the dark with a thread."

Why does Vergil include this much detail, of this intensity, on this particular set of events?

At least two possible answers can be given: one is that the episode is no more than just part of an "elaborate, Hellenistic description" (Quinn 1969:162), included merely as a decorative detail within the general Cretan *ecphrasis*; the other is that put forward by Otis (1964:284-285): that the Labyrinth "symbolizes" also ... the labyrinthine past and its hidden contents. Aeneas here, as in the closely analogous scene of Book 1, gazes at his own past, though this time at his past symbolically disguised. He sees the *Veneris monumenta nefandae*; he sees love possessed of a talisman that can lead it to its dreadful hidden result;

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he sees in other words the mingled horror and pity, the nostalgia and pain of passion brooding over its guilty secret. For here, unlike the scene at the Juno temple of Book 1, he sees and pities not his heroic but his erotic past."

In this lengthy quotation, Otis at no time refers overtly to Aeneas' erotic involvement with Queen Dido of Carthage; but there is nothing else to which he could possibly be referring. This paper assumes that Otis is right at least to the extent that the Pasiphae episode is not there simply for decorative purposes. Even Quinn, in the reference given earlier, observes that "Aeneas is absorbed by the story and *the associations it touches off*" [my italics]; Michael Putnam (1965: 216, note 27) insists that "throughout the *Aeneid* we are never allowed to forget Dido";² and we must remember especially that, later in Book 6 itself (450-476), Aeneas actually encounters Dido's ghost in a bitterly memorable scene. Also, apart from the obvious fact that both the Dido and Pasiphae episodes involve disastrous passion, there are a number of verbal resonances between the two which *might* indicate that Vergil indeed saw them as in some way related. If they were in fact related, then the Pasiphae episode is certainly not there merely for the purposes of ornament.

The issue can be approached by way of two questions:

1. What indications are there in the text that the two episodes may be referring to each other?
2. (A specific application of the first question) Does Vergil anywhere suggest that Dido's passion for Aeneas deserved to be described by an adjective as harsh as *nefanda*?³
 1. (a) What *may* be a faint "echo" can be observed in the fact that both Dido (frequently) and Pasiphae (possibly)⁴ are referred to as *regina* (Pasiphae?)

² Putnam observes how, at *Aen.* 5.572, the horse which Iulus is riding is one which Dido gave *sui monumentum et pignus amoris* ["as a memento of herself and a pledge of her love"] (and the verbal echoes of 6.26 and 28 hardly need stressing); how "ironically, it is a robe of Dido's weaving with which Aeneas drapes the bier of Pallas in XI, 73-75"; and he makes the wider point that "the death scenes of Camilla and Turnus are in large measure re-enactments of Dido's downfall." He concludes: "As we learn early in VI, the misguided love of Pasiphae resulted in the Minotaur, product of an evil love ... it is possible that Virgil's mind jumped from one scene to another through the liaison of the labyrinth image in Bk. V" (i.e. 5.588-591).

³ See the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (1982: s.v. *nefandus*): the word is defined as meaning "wicked, impious, heinous", and is often found in company with other condemnatory epithets like *perniciosus* and *immanis* and nouns such as *stuprum*, *labes*, *facinus* and *cruor*. Its root meaning - "not to be spoken of" - suggests an abomination: but see further note 8.

⁴ It can be argued (see e.g. Austin's 1977 edition of *Aen.* 6, note on line 28) that *regina* must refer to Ariadne and not to Pasiphae - no doubt because of *caeco regens filo vestigia* in 30, which can quite naturally be taken to refer to Theseus' expedition into the Labyrinth using the clew given to him by Ariadne. Austin also points out that *Ariadne* does not fit comfortably into an hexameter whereas *regina* does. Otis, however (1964: 284, note 1), is quite convinced that the "queen" in question is Pasiphae, whom Daedalus "pitied" for her "great passion" (6.28) and helped (via the clew) to visit her dreadful offspring hidden in the depths of the maze (as any mother might want to do). This is an ingenious and sympathetic theory, though unprovable. The flow of the actual text does not clarify the matter much; but it seems to me that if *regina* in 28 is meant to refer (suddenly) to someone other than Pasiphae, the new subject does come as something of a jolt. Furthermore, it is perhaps worth observing that Pöschl (1962: 207, note 7) never for a moment doubts that *regina* refers to Pasiphae here.

6.28; Dido: 1.496, 522, 594, 660, 697, 728; 2.3; 4.1, 133, 283, 296, 334, 504, 586; 6.460). However, given the doubt as to whom the word is referring to in 6.28, and the fact that Dido is a queen (when she is not being designated as *infelix* or *pulcherrima*), this word is not of much help.

- (b) Rather more promising, perhaps, are the qualities of secrecy and furtiveness that characterize both "affairs": we may compare 6.24, 26 and 30 (*suppostaque furto, nefandae* and perhaps *caeca ... vestigia*) with certain passages in Book 4, namely 4.2 (*caeco carpitur igni*: "she is consumed by the hidden fire"), 67 (*tacitum vivit sub pectore vulnus*: "the silent/secret wound is alive deep in her breast"), 171 (*nec iam furtivum Dido meditatur amorem* - "and Dido no longer has a clandestine love in mind" - as she abandons all attempts at concealment) and 337 (*furto*; but there the speaker is Aeneas and the reference is certainly not to anything that Dido may be doing).
- (c) Vergil's description of Daedalus' sympathetic attitude to Pasiphae/Ariadne in 6.28 (*magnum reginae ... miseratus amorem*), whichever of the Cretan royal women it has in mind, also seems to have several verbal echoes in Books 1 and 4 - echoes both of the "magnitude" of the passion and of the pity that it evokes in another person. These echoes are: 1.675 (where the callous Venus speaks of *magno ... amore*), 749 (*longumque bibebat amorem*, "she drank the deep draught of love"), 4.292 (*tantos rumpi non speret amores*, "she would not expect the severing of such a great passion"), 370 (*aut miseratus amantem est?*, "did he pity her who loves him?"), 395 (referring to Aeneas: *magnoque animum labefactus amore*, "shaken to the heart by his(?) / her(?) great love") and 693 (written with what may be very bitter irony: *Tum Iuno omnipotens longum miserata dolorem* - "Then almighty Juno took pity on her prolonged suffering", - where the pity comes from a most unexpected source, and one which is very suspect, in view of the utterly ruthless attitude exhibited towards Dido by Juno earlier in the poem: e.g. at 4.93-104 and 115-127); and we should also remember the description of Aeneas' very last contact with Dido, in the Underworld, in Book 6 (476: *prosequitur lacrimis longe et miseratur euntem*, "his tears go with her at a distance, and he pities her as she goes").

The cumulative effect of the above correspondences and similarities is arguably suggestive,⁵ but not really conclusive. It could be objected that *of course* both women would be called *regina* because of their social status, that the two passions were naturally kept secret for fear of public opinion, though there was a difference of degree in the *culpa*⁶ in each case, (and anyway Dido stopped hiding it quite early on), and that if someone else felt sorry for the heroine's agonizing and disastrous plight in each situation, that is almost inevitable in a poem where pity for suffering plays such a large part. Also,

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- 5 Pöschl (1962:150) draws attention to the similarities between some of these passages, notably 4.395, 6.28 and 476.
- 6 The extent of Dido's moral culpability in the *Aeneid* is thoroughly examined by Niall Rudd in "Dido's *Culpa*" (Chapter 7 in Harrison 1990: 145-166). Rudd sees her as a fine woman who is overpowered by something utterly beyond her control (see especially 162-163: e.g. 163: "... wherever Dido's passion originates (from without or within) it is portrayed as a force which by its very nature overpowers resistance"). He concludes, "... whatever her deserts may have been ... she did not deserve to suffer so cruelly" (165), comparing her with Shakespeare's King Lear in that respect.

"magnitude"-words like *magnus*, *longus* and *tantus* coupled with *amor* are something of a commonplace, even within the confines of Vergil's own corpus, and in themselves prove nothing here.⁷

2. As regards Vergil's use of the word *nefandae* in 6.26: there are some places earlier in the poem where echoes of it - deliberate or otherwise - can be detected.
 - (a) In 4.84-85, Dido holds Aeneas' son Ascanius on her lap, *infandum si fallere possit amorem*, "in case she might be able to outwit/conceal/pretend to herself about her unspeakable passion". (What exactly Dido is trying to achieve here is uncertain, but it looks as if in embracing Ascanius she is imagining, or "fantasizing", that she is actually holding Aeneas). Even if *infandum* does not always mean exactly the same as *nefandus*,⁸ the two words are strongly

⁷ The actual phrase *magnus amor* (in various Cases) occurs 7 times in the *Aeneid* itself (1.171, 344, 675, 716; 3.330; 5.5; 9.197). Of these instances, 4 belong in specifically erotic contexts (1.344, 675; 3.330; 5.5; and of those four, 2 refer to Dido - 1.344 and 675 - while 3.330 refers to Orestes' love for Hermione and 5.5, though it definitely has Dido in mind, is expressed as a general observation about the dire consequences of thwarted passion); one (1.716) inclines in that direction since it refers to Cupid (disguised as Ascanius) showing his "great love" for his supposed father (*falsi genitoris*), Aeneas; the other two (1.171 and 9.197) refer to a "longing" for other things (*telluris* in the first case and *laudum* in the second). Also, there are similar but not identical expressions of great passion such as *impenso amore* at 4.54 (referring to Dido), *saevit amor magnoque irarum fluctuat aestu* ("her passion raves and heaves on a great swell of rage") at 4.532 (also of Dido), *acri amore* (12.392) and *ingenti percussus amore* at *Georg.* 2.476 (of Vergil's own "passion" for the Muses). (Note: I omit minor works like the *Culex* and *Ciris*, whose uncertain authorship would cause needless and useless complications here.)

⁸ See the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *infandum*: "Too horrible or shocking to speak of, unspeakable, monstrous, accursed, etc.". It is found with *facinus*, *impurus*, *dolor* (*Aen.* 2.3, where Aeneas opens his account of the fall of Troy with the *perhaps* significant - in the present context - juxtaposition, *infandum, regina, ...*), *bellum*, *stuprum*, *caedes*, *sanguis* and *Cyclopes* (*Aen.* 3.644). Both *nefandus* and *infandus* appear to be equally powerful expressions of abhorrence and loathing for something that one can hardly get one's vocal organs to articulate. If there is any difference in nuance between the two words, perhaps it lies in the following possibility: that *infandus* means "too painful/upsetting/embarassing to utter" (but not necessarily morally wrong: as in 2.3 quoted above, where the grief and pain - *dolorem* - of Troy's fall, to which *infandum* refers, can hardly be labelled a "sin"; and in 4.85, where Dido, with little Ascanius on her lap, tries to "deceive", in some way, her *infandum amorem*), whereas *nefandus* might rather mean "too evil/sinful to speak of" - a meaning that all of the relevant quotations cited in this paper could easily bear. (I owe this suggested distinction to Dr. J.M. Claassen of the University of Stellenbosch.) A survey of Vergil's own usage of the two words (see Wetmore 1961, under the relevant entries, for references), the detailed results of which are far too extensive to include here but which I intend to present in a forthcoming paper, would more or less corroborate Dr. Claassen's suggestion: *nefandus* seems *always* (like *nefas*) to denote something morally evil; *infandus*, on the other hand, though it may also do so - and that quite frequently - can sometimes (for instance, *Aen.* 1.597; 2.3; 8.578) indicate something very painful but not morally evil. However, the two words are almost interchangeable in Vergil: thus, for example, at 3.644 Achaemenides describes the Cyclopes as *infandi Cyclopes*, while (9 lines later) at 3.653 he calls them a *gentem nefandam*; and Clytemnestra (along with Medea, one of Greek tragedy's arch-murderesses) is called *coniugis infandae* at 11.267.

- (b) In 4.305-306 there is perhaps a faint resonance in Dido's furious question to Aeneas: *dissimulare etiam sperasti, perfide, tantum/posse nefas ...?* "Did you hope, even, you traitor, that you could conceal so great a sin?". But there, *nefas* has of course no necessary reference to Dido's own obsession.
- (c) In 4.497-498 (*abolere nefandi/cuncta viri monumenta iuvat*, "I've decided to obliterate all reminders of that appalling man"), although Vergil is actually using words which Dido is, clearly, applying to Aeneas and not to herself, the verbal echoes in *nefandi* and *monimenta* are very strong (and see note 2 concerning 5.572).
- (d) In 4.563-564 (*ilia dolos dirumque nefas in pectore versat/certa mori*, "that woman is planning trickery and some awful sin in her heart - and she is sure to die"), Hermes warns the sleeping Aeneas that Dido might be "up to no good" (unspecified; but *certa mori* in 564 suggests that the *nefas* in this case may be suicide). There is no necessary connection here (apart perhaps from *nefas*) with the Pasiphae situation.

These four passages are also suggestive and also, in my view, inconclusive in themselves: verbal echoes, even strong ones, more than a thousand lines apart cannot definitely prove anything. Nonetheless, the echoes are there, and they *might* be both deliberate and significant.

It would be more or less absurd to compare the widowed Dido's passion for the travel-weary and very handsome Aeneas (note e.g. 1.589: *deo similis*; 589-593; 4.141-150, especially *pulcherrimus* in 141 and *tantum egregio decus enitet ore*, "so great was the beauty shining from his handsome face") to Pasiphae's nightmare craving for an animal, or Dido's temporary insanity and eventual suicide with the hideous, unnatural outcome, and offspring, of Pasiphae's lust: but there are nonetheless similarities: both women are royal and behave in a manner inappropriate, at the least, for a queen: both try to keep their passion a secret; the outcome in each case is in some sense disastrous; and both women, in the grip of cravings beyond their control (see note 9 on *furor*), are pitiable and so excite pity in at least one other character. It should also be noted of Dido's love for Aeneas that, while it may not fully qualify for the label *Venus nefanda*, it is frequently described in terms that show it to have been what might be called "Very-Problematic-If-Not-*Nefanda*": the imagery and vocabulary used all belong under the following headings: Fire, Wound, Disease, Plague, *Furor* and its cognates and synonyms, and some others which are vaguer and more general.⁹

⁹ FIRE: *Aen.* 1.660, 673; 4.2, 23, 54, 66, 101, 300, 360, 364, 376, 384 and 697; WOUND: 4.1, 2, 67 and 69-73; DISEASE: 4.8(?) (*male sana*), 389 (*aegra*) and 391-392; PLAGUE: 1.712 and 4.90; FUROR etc.: 1.659; 4.8(?) (*male sana*), 64(?) (note *inhians*), 69, 78-79 (note *demens*, and repetition of *iterum*), 91, 101, 283, 298, 300-301 (note *saevit inops animi* and *bacchatur*), 374 (*demens* again), 376, 433, 465 (in Dido's nightmare), 474, 501, 548, 595 (*insania*) and 697; GENERAL: There are a number of other words and larger units which convey, in less specific, or less imagistic, terms the fact that Dido's situation and her condition are very problematic. Some examples are: 1.712 and 749 (*infelix*; and note *longumque bibebat amorem*, which *might* suggest taking a draught of poison, unless it is simply the familiar image of draining a cup); 4.19 (*culpa*); on which see Rudd, above, note 6; also 4.172), 169 (*leti* and *malorum*), 194(?) (*turpique cupidine captos*, "in the grip of disgraceful lust"; but that is of course the rumour - and doubtless the wording - spread abroad about Aeneas and Dido by the

On the strength of the evidence presented in this paper, we can probably say, with certainty, no more than the following:

1. There are a number of verbal echoes between both the relevant sections of the *Aeneid*; and some of those echoes are striking.
2. The two passages (reckoning from the end of Book 4) are only 894 lines apart - not a great distance in so consciously and finely wrought a work as the *Aeneid*. The possibility of deliberate parallelism and cross-referencing here is very strong.
3. The similarities between the two women and their situations are fairly strong, poignant and tragic - facts of which Vergil, of all people, must have been conscious.

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monstrous Fama, and we have already been told, in 190, that Fama *pariter facta atque infecta canebat*, "She tells of facts and non-facts equally", 450 (*infelix* again), 474 (*evicta dolore*, "overwhelmed by suffering") and (so memorably) 696-697 (*nec fato merita nec morte peribat, sed misera ante diem*, "and she was dying not according to her destiny, nor by a death she had deserved, but piteously, before her time").

Clearly, the Fire image and the phenomenon of *Furor* predominate in the tragic story of Dido's blazing, destructive and uncontrollable passion.