

CASA ESSAY

The paper judged to be the best student essay submitted to *Akroterion* by November 30, preceding publication of the volume for that specific year, is published annually as the *CASA / KVSA Essay*. The competition, which is sponsored by the *Classical Association of South Africa*, is open to undergraduate students every year and to Honours students in even-numbered years. The winner receives a cash prize of R500.

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE DIDO - AENEAS EPISODE IN VIRGIL'S *AENEID* AND CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S *DIDO, QUEENE OF CARTHAGE*

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The Dido-Aeneas episode in Virgil's *Aeneid* is one of the most celebrated stories ever written. It has inspired countless artists in the fields of art, music and of course, literature. Christopher Marlowe's *Dido, Queene of Carthage* is an obscure, early work that no one seems to pay much attention to except Marlowe scholars, who prefer to occasionally study what makes Marlowe's first attempt at writing for the stage a very bad play, a reputation it thoroughly deserves.

It is strange, however, that Marlowe, the genius responsible for *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* and *Tamberlaine*, could have produced something that is considered on the one hand bad and on the other an adaptation of Virgil, whose work has commanded nothing but the highest respect since ancient times. While Virgil was undoubtedly Marlowe's primary source,¹ one should keep in mind that Virgil and Marlowe wrote for different reasons. Many of Virgil's intentions were political. Virgil glorified the politics of Augustus and encouraged the Roman people to take pride in their roots. Marlowe wrote this play at university and his audience would have been students who knew Virgil well. In transforming Aeneas into an obtuse, pathetic kind of "pet" of a domineering and oddly masculine Dido, Marlowe strips the story of nobility and adds a prominent ridiculous and comic element that strongly suggests that he is parodying rather than re-writing Virgil for the amusement of his fellow students. It should also be mentioned that Marlowe's play was premiered by a children's company,² and the notion of a little boy Dido pleading with a little boy Aeneas,³ on top of Marlowe's comic script must have made for hilarious viewing.

Dido in the *Aeneid* is a fascinating character, a wise and respectable ruler of a great civilization.⁴ She is also sympathetic, three-dimensional and deeply human, the victim of forces beyond her control; in stark contrast to a rather uninteresting, overly

¹ Although Marlowe follows Virgil in this play, stronger emphasis on the character of Dido is derived from Ovid's *Heroides*. Cf. Cheney 1997:9 for Ovid's substantial influence on Marlowe's work.

² The Children of Her Majesty's Chapel at Blackfriars.

³ Female roles were always played by boys in Elizabethan times.

⁴ See the bull's hide incident (*Aen.* 1.367 – 368), the greatness of Carthage as a city (1.455) and Dido described as a great lawmaker (1.507 – 508).

sensitive Aeneas whose great destiny to found Rome does not save him from a negative reaction from the reader when he leaves Dido to pursue his destiny.⁵

When Book 4 opens, Dido can “get no peace from love’s disquiet” (*Aen.* 4.5). She acknowledges her feelings to Anna, but is reluctant to act upon them, out of respect for Sychaeus (4.15 – 16) and the gods (4.25 – 27).⁶ Despite multiple sacrifices divine approval is refused, and Dido’s indecision eventually brings the construction of the city to a halt,⁷ her degradation intensifying to the extent that it transcends the personal into the political (Quinn 1965:19). Soon hereafter the cave scene is depicted, which Virgil aptly describes as follows:

That day was doom’s first birthday and that first day was the cause of
Evils: Dido reckoned nothing for appearance or reputation:
The love she had brooded on now has a secret love no longer;
Marriage she called it, drawing the word to veil her sin (*Aen.* 4.169 – 172).

Dido’s calling this incident a marriage represents “one more step from reality into self-deception” (Quinn 1965:20), and embodies Dido’s unstable state of mind in the rest of the book. When Aeneas decides to leave, Dido is described as “raving / Like some Bacchante driven wild” (*Aen.* 4.300 – 301). She calls Aeneas “unfaithful” and “heartless”; she blames him for the loss of her reputation (4.320 – 323) and scorns his protests that he leaves by the god’s will and not his own (4.379 – 380).⁸ The reader’s sympathy is once again evoked when Dido at last realizes that Aeneas will not stay with her and she then decides to die:

Hapless Dido, frightened out of her wits by her destiny
Prayed for death: she would gaze no more on the dome of daylight
(*Aen.* 4.451 – 45).

The reader is both fearful and oddly respectful as the deathly calm with which she systematically organizes her own suicide once again turns to anger, her cursing of Aeneas and all that he has done culminating in the curse of Hannibal before she mounts the pyre and kills herself.⁹

⁵ It has often been suggested that this attitude towards Aeneas is only held by modern readers because “we are post-Romantics”, cf. McLeish 1972:127. There is strong evidence, however, that ancient readers felt exactly the same sympathy for Dido, for example Ovid’s *Heroides* contains the first reference to Dido after Virgil and tells the story from Dido’s perspective (an idea Marlowe has used in this play too). Ovid would never have done this were it considered inappropriate, cf. Farron 1980:43.

⁶ This also presents Dido as fulfilling the Roman ideal of being an *univira*, a woman with only one husband, a status immensely difficult to achieve considering the frequency of divorce in Roman society.

⁷ According to Edgeworth, Dido is a symbol of Carthage itself and the city also suffers with her, this scene foreshadowing her death (1976: 130).

⁸ This is also the first incidence where Dido’s passion and Aeneas’ piety clash openly, an immensely important theme in this book.

⁹ Edgeworth 1976:132 believes that the accusations Dido levels against Aeneas, as well as her method of suicide (stabbing herself, then mounting the pyre) may reflect the suicide of Hastrubal’s wife after his surrender to Scipio.

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In Marlowe, the Dido-Aeneas relationship is subject to a doubling device which Kinney (2000:267) calls the “Ganymede script”. This device is introduced in the first scene, which begins “rather shockingly” (Godshalk 1971:2) with “Jupiter dandling Ganimed upon his knee”, “pulling feathers out of Mercury’s wing ... offering these and other presents in return for love and defying Juno to spoil his fun”.¹⁰ We thus know immediately that this is no conventional interpretation of Virgil (Waith 1965: 233). The portrayal of Jupiter as a perverse old man risking all to please a little boy he is infatuated with, introduces the theme of unnatural and destructive love (Godshalk 1971:3).

Homosexual love is a constant undercurrent in this play, which features an oddly masculine, powerful Dido courting a boyish, effeminate Aeneas.¹¹ As Kinney (2000:265) observes, “if the names of the characters were removed from Marlowe’s text, one might have difficulty distinguishing the sex of its speakers”. Marlowe’s Dido does not behave like a conventional romantic heroine at all, her style of speech in particular shows no trace of orthodox femininity (Kinney 2000:265). Her first line in the play reproaches Aeneas:

What stranger art thou that doest eye me thus? (2.1.74)

When Aeneas thanks Dido for her kindness to Ascanius, she replies:

*Remember who thou art, speake like thy selfe,
Humilitie belongs to common groomes (2.1.100 – 101)*

Her reaction to Aeneas’ relation of Troy’s fall is also strangely erratic. First, she seems to be calling him a coward:

*What, faints Aeneas to remember Troy?
In whose defence he fought so valiantly (2.1.118 – 119)*

When Aeneas emotively relates the murder of Priam, she cries out:

O end Aeneas, I can heare no more (2.1.243)

At the narrative’s conclusion, however, she shows no signs of Virgilian Dido’s desire to hear the story repeated and falls back into the callousness that began the scene:

*Troian, thy ruthfull tale hath made me sad:
Come let us thinke upon some pleasing sport,
To rid me from these melancholly thoughts (2.1.301 – 303)*

This overly frank and flippant mode of expression is shockingly unlike Virgil’s dignified queen, who not only gains the immediate respect of the reader, but is not portrayed as being at all forceful or insensitive in her inquiries. One cannot help feeling disbelief at the prospect of a genius like Marlowe initiating this kind of character change out of mere ineptitude. This is the first indication of Marlowe’s intention to transform Virgil’s tragedy into a comedy.

¹⁰ *Dido, Queene of Carthage* 1.1 stage directions.

¹¹ The play being performed by children reinforces this, as children’s companies were irrevocably connected with homosexual desire in the Elizabethan mind. Cf. Kinney 2000:271.

This becomes more evident when contrasting the way Virgil and Marlowe portray Aeneas himself. Virgil does not portray Aeneas' treatment of Dido or his behaviour in general in a particularly good light.¹² While Aeneas is an exemplary leader when it comes to his crew,¹³ he is not the traditional epic hero: annoyingly sensitive and rather prone to lamentations.¹⁴ The first time we see him, in the storm scene in Book 1, he is petrified:

A mortal chill went through Aeneas and sapped him;
he groaned (*Aen.* 1.91 – 92).

As Fuhrer (1989:66) points out:

Throughout Book 1 we see him sighing, crying or being frightened which suggests a rather unhardened state of mind and a rather emotional character. Furthermore, Aeneas is depicted in fear or sadness twice in book two, five times in book three [and] twice in book four.

Furthermore, Aeneas' already - minimal interest in his great destiny as the founder of Rome (Farron 1980:37) is forgotten completely after the cave scene. Virgil describes both him and Dido as “forgetting their kingdoms, rapt in a trance of lust” (*Aen.* 4.194). Once Mercury is sent to demand his immediate departure, however, Aeneas is unwilling to leave, but is so horrified at the gods' displeasure that he cannot get away fast enough:

Dazed indeed by that vision was Aeneas, and dumbfounded:
His hair stood on end with terror, the voice stuck in his throat
Awed by this admonition from the great throne above
He desired to fly the country, dear though it was to him (*Aen.* 4.278 – 282).

In the ensuing quarrel with Dido, Aeneas is almost torn apart by the conflicting emotions of passion and piety within him, but we are left in no doubt as to which he will choose. He also seems callously insensitive to Dido, declaring that:

I [did not] offer you marriage
At any time or consent to be bound by a marriage contract (4.338 – 339).¹⁵

Furthermore, even though “God-fearing Aeneas ... longed to soothe her anguish with consolation” (*Aen.* 4.493), it is clear that Aeneas puts the gods' wishes first:

No more reproaches, then – they only torture us both.
God's will, not mine, says “Italy” (*Aen.* 4. 360 – 361).

¹² See Farron 1980.

¹³ When they shipwreck at Carthage, Aeneas kills stags for his men, consoles them, and masks his own fear, *Aen.* 1.194.

¹⁴ i.e. in *Aeneid* Books 1 to 4.

¹⁵ Virgil has made it perfectly plain that Dido, by calling the relationship a marriage, is delusional (Quinn 1965:20). Aeneas only corrects her here when this definition is inconvenient for him.

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The strength of Aeneas' *pietas* is indicated in his expectation that Dido has to be content with his tossing their love aside in this manner. It is interesting, however, that Aeneas does not contradict Dido's subsequent scorning of the gods, which suggests that while he may resent the gods' decision, his *pietas* prevents him from scorning or disobeying them. By the time Dido sends Anna to plead with him on her behalf, he has become

adamant against all pleading / Fate blocked them, heaven stopped his ears
lest he turn complaisant (*Aen.* 4.439 – 440).¹⁶

Aeneas' behaviour here provides an ideal opportunity for parody if Marlowe's intentions were to parody Virgil's tragedy. Marlowe's near-complete deletion of the importance of Aeneas' destiny creates a rather obtuse character that seems hopelessly unsuited for everything that befalls him, thus making him much funnier for the audience. The cave scene is an ideal example.

Virgil places this scene amidst much thunder and lightning symbolically forecasting the destruction that will ensue. Marlowe's storm serves no symbolic function whatsoever and merely "[provides] the opportunity for adultery" (Gill 1977:148). Marlowe also inserts an interesting comic love scene just before they enter the cave, where he "fills in the Virgilian blanks and offers a *mimesis* of two speaking subjects, negotiating their physical union" (Kinney 2000:264).

Here, Dido expresses her feelings in a manner that can hardly be called subtle, agonizing over

*The thing that I will dye before I aske
And yet desire to have before I dye. Aeneas (3.4.9 – 10)*

Aeneas obtusely replies:

What ailes my Queene, is she falne sicke of late? (3.4.24)

When he eventually realizes what she means, he insists that he is unworthy of Dido's love (3.4.33 – 34), but changes his mind seconds later, swearing "Never to like or love any but her" (3.4.50). As Kinney (2000:266) observes, Aeneas "moves from complete self-depreciation to apparently complete self-commitment in a kind of performative parataxis", which may easily be construed as being deliberately comical or parodying Virgilian Aeneas' inclination to move from one extreme to the other, just in reverse.¹⁷

Dido then showers him with gifts and seems to transform him into a "cardboard cutout" of Sychaeus,¹⁸ attempting to re-write his destiny as King of Carthage rather than founder of Rome:

¹⁶ This represents the complete triumph of Aeneas' piety over his passion.

¹⁷ i.e. from complete self-commitment in his relationship with Dido to complete self-depreciation after the appearance of Mercury.

¹⁸ This comparison with Sychaeus occurs many times, indeed, Dido seems to be attempting to turn Aeneas into Sychaeus from the first time she sees him: *Warlike Aeneas, and in these base robes? / Goe fetch the garment which Sychaeus ware (2.1.79 – 80).*

*Sichaeus, not Aeneas be thou calde:
The King of Carthage, not Anchises sonne:
Hold, take these Jewels at thy Lover's hand,
These golden bracelets, and this wedding ring,
Wherewith my husband woo'd me yet a maide (3.4.59 – 63)*

As Gill (1977:151) points out:

[Aeneas] never achieves a heroic status and consequently remains a puppet for the gods, temporarily a prisoner or pet for Dido to show off to her people ... and finally, by no choice of his own, a caddish traitor to her love.

She further suggests that this diminishment of Aeneas could very well come from Virgil himself, with one notable difference: Virgil has eight books left to save his hero's reputation. Marlowe has little choice but to diminish Aeneas further, clearly casting Dido as the play's heroine (Gill 1977:152). The "Ganymede Script" also comes into play here as Jupiter's unnatural love for Ganymede is paralleled in Dido's unnatural love for Aeneas. Both Jupiter and Dido assume the role of "masculine sonneteer" (Kinney 2000:265), wooing the effeminate boy.¹⁹

Dido's relentless attempts to keep Aeneas in Carthage repeatedly suggest Marlowe's comic intentions, for example, the two scenes where Aeneas attempts to leave (4.3.4 and 5.1), which are clearly meant to salvage Dido's reputation but fail somewhat for two reasons. Firstly, there is far too much comedy in these scenes to be taken seriously. Secondly, Marlowe betrays a blatant desire to get things over with, ripping through the scenes leading up to Dido's suicide at the risk of compromising their already-precarious tragic and dramatic value.

Aeneas cuts a pitiful figure in these two scenes. Mercury's order to leave is mitigated in a short soliloquy, where Aeneas once again demonstrates his inability to stick to one resolve:

*Jove wils it so, my mother wils it so:
Let my Phenissa graunt, and then I goe:
Graunt she or no, Aeneas must away (4.3.5 – 7)*

In this respect, Virgil's Aeneas is entirely unlike Marlowe's: when Aeneas is commanded to go, he obeys. Marlovian Aeneas seems to think he has some choice in the matter and waits for Dido's approval, before contradicting himself and decides to leave with or without her approval, thus reinforcing Dido's dominance in their relationship; Aeneas' fear of her, and his awareness that he is her "prisoner".²⁰ When Dido enters, Aeneas loses all ability to stand up for himself and allows Dido to bestow him crown and scepter (4.4.44 – 45). Thereupon Aeneas predictably gives

¹⁹ As Kinney 2000:267 points out, "Godlike Dido, revisionary historian, seems to have acquired a Ganymede of her own".

²⁰ This is reinforced by his subsequent instructions that his men be subtle in their preparation: *Dido casts her eyes like anchors out, / To stay my Fleete from loosing forth the Bay* (4.3.25 – 26).

way and promises to stay.²¹ This scene suggests that Marlowe's Aeneas is much less respectful of the gods than Virgil's hero. When one considers the trouble that the king of the gods' infatuation with Ganymede is causing, one can perhaps not blame Aeneas for this attitude. Nevertheless, his weakness is shameful, and his position as Dido's "pet" is reinforced by his consent to be paraded "as Didos husband through the Punicke streets" (4.4.67). Dido further degrades herself by inventing a number of ridiculous ways to keep Aeneas in Carthage:

*Goe, bid my Nurse take yong Ascanius,
And beare him in the countrey to her house,
Aeneas will not goe without his sonne:
And lest he should ...
Bring me his oares, his tackling and his sailes (4.4.105 – 109)*

While one might interpret these lines as the actions of a desperate woman in "a fit of apprehension" (Godshalk 1971:2), Dido's ridiculous last lines in the scene soundly disprove this:

*In steed of oares, let him use his hands,
And swim to Italy (4.4.163 – 164)*

When we next see Aeneas, he is directing the construction of Carthage as if nothing has happened, even going so far as to welcome Mercury when he arrives a second time, demanding that Aeneas leave (5.1.53 – 54). Unlike in Virgil's version, Aeneas does not leave out of piety, but because he discovers the substitution of Ascanius with Cupid (5.1.44 – 45). This provides him with a convenient excuse that absconds him from all blame. He then gathers tackling, oars and sails from Iarbas²² and resolves to depart immediately, only to be drawn into a second confrontation with "a near-hysterical Dido, swiftly changing tactics to hold back a stolid, unimaginative Aeneas" (Gill 1977:153). Marlowe's Aeneas endures a similar, if not quite so poignantly portrayed dilemma to Virgil's hero :

*O Queene of Carthage, wert thou ugly blacke,
Aeneas could not choose but hold thee deare,
Yet must he not gainsay the Gods behest (5.1.125 – 127)*

Dido ceases her usual manipulation and becomes more Virgilian, calling Aeneas a "*Serpent that came creeping from the shoare*" (5.1.165) and blames him for the destruction of her reputation. Marlowe even resorts to quoting the original Latin,²³ which Gill (1977:153 – 154) thinks appropriate because "most of his audience ... would be familiar with Virgil's lines ... which carry a richness of grief in their dignity that can hardly be reproduced ... in English". However, it is questionable whether

²¹ *O Dido, patronesse of all our lives, / When I leave thee, death be my punishment (4.4.54 – 55).*

²² Marlowe has transformed Iarbas into a jealous suitor of Dido's who is only too glad to see Aeneas leave.

²³ Dido: *Si bene quid de te merui, fuit aut tibi quidquam / Dulce meum, miserere domus labentis: et istam / Oro, si quis adhuc precibus locus, exue mentem.* Aeneas: *Desine meque tuis incendere teque querelis, / Italiam non sponte sequor (5.1.136 – 140).*

Marlowe would have wanted to reproduce this effect when writing a comedy. It is more likely that these lines were included because a student audience would have been familiar with them, or because the presence of such dignified Latin here might even have heightened the comic effect.

When Aeneas eventually leaves, the audience is expected to show a similar response to Marlowe's Dido as to Virgil's heroine. However, in act 5.1.277, just after Dido orders the construction of the pyre, it appears as though Marlowe may have lost interest and wanted the play to end. This period before Dido's death is masterfully written by Virgil in a style resembling slow motion. In Marlowe, Dido decides to die, she discerns how and when to do so, and delivers her death speech and curse all in the space of a page! Her speech is laced with melodrama (Gill 1977:153):

*Here lye the Sword that in the darksome Cave
He drew, and swore by to be true to me,
Thou shalt burn first, thy crime is worse then his (5.1.295 – 297)*

This looks petty and ridiculous compared to the dignity of Virgil's lines:

O relics of him, things dear to me while fate, while heaven allowed
It receive this life of mine, release me from my troubles!
I have lived, I have run to the finish the course which fortune gave me:
And now, a queenly shade, I shall pass to the world below
(*Aen.* 4.651 – 654).

As if her speech were not threat enough to Dido's dying a graceful death, Marlowe then races through the subsequent suicides of Iarbas and Anna in the space of fifteen lines (Gill 1977:42), completely destroying any semblance of dignity in the scene. But is this deliberate? The rapidity of these events could suggest that Marlowe is becoming bored and inept. If we consider Marlowe's intentions to be comic, it does not seem unlikely that he wanted to make his audience laugh rather than write a bad tragic scene.

If one looks at this play in the context of it being watched by students, the notion of Marlowe intending to parody Virgil and make his fellow students laugh at what they had previously been forced to take seriously makes far more sense than him writing a dreadful tragedy with serious intentions. Furthermore, Marlowe's characterization of Dido differs considerably from that of the *Aeneid* and it is worth considering whether Marlowe would have made such a change if his intention were simply to adapt Virgil. Marlowe had the chance to write a great tragedy. Instead, the entire story is overwhelmed with comic scenes featuring a domineering and erratic Dido and a dull, pathetic Aeneas. The performance of this play by child actors, what Kinney (2000:270) calls "a troupe of Ganymedes", would no doubt have added to the ridiculous element. It is highly unlikely that anyone with the slightest respect for Virgil (or with half of Marlowe's genius), would have written an adaptation so steeped in the ridiculous with serious intentions, and it is for this reason that Marlowe may be construed as parodying Virgil rather than imitating him.

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