

Dido's curse of Aeneas and Rome: An historical endorsement of prophetic emotions

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ABSTRACT

Vergil constructs Dido's curse on Aeneas in direct correspondence to Dido's personal experiences; it is thus a measured response to Aeneas' desertion, as it includes a desire that he suffer what Dido herself has endured. Because Dido had initially offered a union between the Trojans and Tyrians and considered herself and Aeneas married, her curse involves both their nations.

KEYWORDS

curse, justice, vengeance

In his construction of Dido's speech cursing Aeneas and his descendants, Vergil employs historical events in a manner that endorses a belief in the power and destructive capacity of vehement emotions – in other words, he recognizes the power of curses. His contemporary vantage point affords him the ability to 'predict' events and utilize historical fact that thus appears to manifest the curse or prophesy. The knowledge of history familiar to his audience allows him to refer to actual events that had occurred in prior Roman history (but would have been subsequent to Dido's speech had she really existed),¹ and makes them appear to be the

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¹ According to the ancient historians Timaeus of Tauromenium and Pompeius Trogus (whose history survives in Justin's *Epitoma historiarum Philippicarum Pompei Trogi*), the historical Dido and Aeneas, having lived centuries apart, could never have met. For a useful synopsis of the ancient accounts, see DESMOND, M.: *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality and the Medieval Aeneid*. Minneapolis 1994, 24–27.

result of Dido's damning of Aeneas and his people. The effect of Vergil's use of such historical details is a ratification of the power of curses.

Dido's curse on Aeneas finds its epic roots in Polyphemus' curse on Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. The relationship between Polyphemus and his father Poseidon is the epic precursor to the relationship between Dido and Juno in the *Aeneid*. Vergil parallels the actions of Poseidon that produce Odysseus' sufferings at sea with the meddlings of Juno, in her vain attempts to forestall the Trojans' arrival in Italy. Juno's actions provide a structural framework for the events of the *Aeneid*, as Poseidon's do in the *Odyssey*; similarly, Dido's curse functions as the cause of specific future events, just as Polyphemus' curse does. While Odysseus must struggle against the opposing power of Poseidon to reach his homeland, so Aeneas must endure the resistance of Juno in his efforts to reach his new home. The voyages of both Aeneas and Odysseus are thus the result of forces of hatred acting against them and attempting to prevent their eventual and fated arrivals at their destinations. The ability of these two heroes to complete their journeys in the face of such resistance serves to color their achievements as admirable and praiseworthy, and raise them to a status of hard won, valuable exploits: *Tantae molis erat Romanam condere gentem* (*Aen.* 1.33). Furthermore, whereas the specific wishes of Polyphemus are manifested in the details of Odysseus' arrival on Ithaca, the particulars of Dido's curse are realized in events both within the epic and beyond it, in subsequent Roman legend and history.

Dido's treatment of Aeneas as anathema, which reflects Polyphemus' (and Poseidon's) view of Odysseus, prefigures the eventual roles of the heroic figure as not only heroic survivor, but as saviour. Just as Odysseus eventually survives his harrowing journey to return home, where he rids his own small society of the unwanted presence of the suitors and thus renews his kingship on Ithaca, Aeneas will emerge from his own odyssey to establish a new home for the displaced, itinerant Trojans, after encountering and superceding the resistance of certain native Italian tribes – an act that effectively gives birth to the Roman nation. (Beyond the events of the *Aeneid*, Dido's Carthage will become the adversary – paralleling the opposing power of Poseidon – to the emerging power of Rome, a force against which the Romans must struggle and eventually defeat.) Through their abilities to prevail over such adversarial forces, Aeneas and Odysseus emerge from their struggles as saviour-figures, as founders or re-establishers of civic order. The ultimate triumph over forces of resistance and hatred ultimately substantiates the relationship between blessings and curses as inter-dependent binary opposites.²

In the composition of Dido's curse, Vergil intertwines not only Roman history and prophecy but incorporates circumstances which Dido, as a character in the epic, has herself experienced; that is, as if in accordance with the ancient *Lex Talionis*, Dido's curse on Aeneas does not exceed

²The curse-blessing interplay is preeminently manifest in the figure of Oedipus. As a result of his relationship with his mother, he is the source of the blight on the crops, and so is a curse; when he saves the city by answering the riddle of the sphinx, he is a blessing; when he discovers his ignorant fulfilment of the oracle, he curses himself; ultimately, he becomes a tutelary figure who bestows both blessings and curses on Athens. As Segal notes, "In the *Oedipus Tyrannus* the king who has saved the city becomes the source of its pollution. In . . . the *Oedipus Coloneus*, by contrast, the helpless outcast becomes the true hero, the source of an inner strength invisible to others." (SEGAL, C.: *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text*. Ithaca 1986, 39.) While neither Odysseus nor Aeneas curses himself but rather is cursed by another (and Oedipus could be understood to have been cursed initially by the oracle that predicts such a horrendous future for him), each, by prevailing over the curses placed on him, eventually functions as a restorer of order and so brings a civic blessing to his people. Each has suffered being a helpless outcast; each arguably possesses an inner strength that may be invisible to but also a benefit to others.



the bounds of what she has suffered – despite the fact that Aeneas was not directly responsible for much of what she suffered. What matters to her is not the precise pain that she encountered as a result of Aeneas’ presence in her life, but the kind of suffering which she has personally experienced, suffering that she knows first-hand. Giving additional depth to her curse, the poet includes images of and references to the fall of Troy; these images also refer to descriptions from Book 2 and serve to connect the fall of Troy to the emergence of Rome. Commentators generally observe that her curse echoes Polyphemos’ curse on Odysseus, and also that those who are on the verge of death are gifted with prophetic foresight (which is another epic feature; both Patroclus and Hector experience prophetic clarity of vision in the moments before their deaths). Vergil adroitly combines all these elements to compose a speech of allusive and crucial significance to the epic, as a whole and beyond. As Austin notes, “The passage makes the tale of Dido part of Roman history, as if it were Virgil’s justification for including it in his epic.”³

The curse of Polyphemos is briefer than Dido’s, but provides some of the structure for its future counterpart:

κλυθι, Ποσειδάων γαιήοχε, κυανοχαῖτα,
εἰ ἐτεόν γε σός εἰμι, πατήρ δ’ ἐμὸς εὖχεαι εἶναι,
δὸς μὴ Ὀδυσσῆα πολυπύρρῳ οἴκαδ’ ἰκέσθαι
νῖδν Λαέρτew, Ἰθάκῃ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ ἔχουτα.
ἀλλ’ εἴ οἱ μοῖρ’ ἐστὶ φίλους τ’ ἰδέειν καὶ ἰκέσθαι
οἶκον ἐνυκτίμενον καὶ ἐν ἐξ πατρίδα γαῖαν,
ὄψε’ κακῶς ἔλθωι, ὀλέσας ἅπο πάντας ἐταίρους,
νῆος ἐπ’ ἀλλοτρίης, εὖροι δ’ ἐν πῆματ’ αἰὶν’ οἴκῳ.
(Odyssey 9. 528–535)

Hear me, Poseidon, dark-haired shaker of the earth. If I am truly your son, if you claim to be my father, then grant that Odysseus, the son of Laertes, raider of cities, who makes his home on Ithaka, not reach his home. But if it is fated that he see his loved ones again, that he arrive at his homeland and reach his well-built house, let him arrive there late and under dire circumstances, after all his companions have been destroyed, in a ship not his own, and let him find grievous troubles at home.⁴

By beginning Dido’s prayer with an invocation to several deities rather than one, as Polyphemos does, Vergil deploys *oppositio in imitando* with great effect:

*Sol, qui terrarum flammis opera omnia lustras,
tuque harum interpret curarum et conscia Iuno,
nocturnisque Hecate triviis ululata per urbes
et Dirae ultrices et di morientis Elissae,
accipite haec, meritumque malis advertite numen
et nostras audite preces.*
(Aen. 4. 607–612)

Oh, Sun! You who survey everything on earth from your fiery abode; and you, Juno, who knows all and understands these concerns of mine; and you, Hecate, whose name has been shrieked throughout cities at the crossroads of night; and you avenging Furies and gods of Elissa, who is soon to die; receive my words, turn your divine power deservedly against these evils, hear my prayers.

³AUSTIN, R. G.: *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Quartus*. Oxford 1955, 177 (ad v. 607).

⁴All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.



Whereas Polyphemus calls solely on Poseidon, Dido invokes multiple deities with whom she, as a character, has been linked during the course of the epic, and who simultaneously represent the enormous forces that will ensure the realization of her curse. In further contrast to Polyphemus, who has no respect for gods other than his father Poseidon,⁵ Dido evokes not only deities who provide universal protection (Sol and Hekate are forces of day and night, forces which see all) and power to her words (the Furies are spirits of vengeance), but also the singular deity who has had a prominent role in Dido's current circumstance, is closely related to Carthage, and who is also, from a functional perspective, the figure most closely related to Poseidon: Juno. This combination of elements gives the curse that follows immense power, an even greater power than that of a father seeking vengeance for his injured child, for it elicits forces that are universal. Of these addressees, Sol is the only traditionally male figure, who, along with the accompanying female forces associated with the night (Hekate is a counterpart to Diana; the Furies are likewise associated with darkness), surveys everything on earth. Sol is the god whom Ajax invokes before his suicide;⁶ this reference likewise anticipates Dido's imminent actions. Sol also has close connections with Medea (he was her grandfather), to whom the poet assimilates Dido frequently in Book 4.⁷

Dido begins the actual curse with a nod to fate that reflects the sentiment of Polyphemus: *si tangere portus / infandum caput ac terris adnare necesse est, / et sic fata Iovis poscunt, hic terminus haeret*, "If it must be that that unspeakable man sail to land and reach safe harbor, if the fate of Jupiter so demands, if this outcome is fixed. . ." (*Aen.* 4. 612–614). Dido omits the option of Aeneas not reaching Italy but rather leaves it as an unspoken possibility, the alternative to what she does express – "if he must reach a safe harbor". She thus demonstrates her understanding that his mission is destined, and, like Juno, she does not have the power to alter it. Dido picks up Polyphemus' acknowledgement of fate, *μοῖρα*, with the typical Roman word for what is destined, *fata*, but emphasizes the idea of a fixed outcome with the mention of *terminus*. Through this term, Vergil compresses both time and culture with wording that a later Roman might have used, deploying the image of a boundary stone, which, as Page points out, is "A truly Roman image of immovability".⁸ The poet thus adroitly combines the Homeric antecedent of the curse with images and language that will resonate with his contemporary audience.

In stating the conditions for her curse – "If it must be that *that unspeakable man* sail to land and reach a safe harbor. . ." – Dido refers to Aeneas – or more specifically, his head – as

⁵E.g., his remarks at 9. 273–278: "You are a fool, stranger, or else have come from very far away, since you bid me to fear or be wary of the gods; for the Cyclopes give no heed to aegis-bearing Zeus, or any of the blessed gods, since we are stronger by far. I would spare neither you or nor your companions to escape the hatred of Zeus – unless the spirit moved me."

⁶Sophocles, *Ajax* 845.

⁷Vergil's portrayal of Dido as an epic-tragic heroine, particularly in her desertion by Aeneas, is infused with references to Medea. These references, along with various allusions to epic and tragic characters ranging from Penelope and Polyphemus to Ajax and Alcestis to Pentheus and Orestes, arguably make Dido the most complex figure in the epic. Dido as the wounded deer at 4. 69 reflects Apollonius' assimilation of Medea to a doe pursued by dogs (*Argonautica*, 4. 12–13); Dido's speech to Aeneas at 4. 365 bears many resemblances to Medea's to Jason (*Argo.* 4. 355); Dido's depiction of the sorceress who could assist her in casting a spell on Aeneas to save his love at 4. 487–491 recalls that of Medea's powers as a sorceress and her association with Hekate (*Argo.* 3. 529); Vergil's description of the contrast between the peace of night and Dido's restlessness at 4. 522–527 echoes *Argo.* 3. 744–751; Dido's question imagining how she could have killed Aeneas at 4. 600–601 recalls Medea's and Jason's dismemberment of her brother at *Argo.* 4. 468–477; Dido kissing her couch at 4. 659 echoes Medea's similar action at *Argo.* 4. 26.

⁸PAGE, T. E.: *The Aeneid of Virgil, Books I–VI*. London 1931, 389 (*ad* 4. 614).



infandum. This word recalls various previous moments in the poem, many of which describe what the Trojans have suffered thus far. When Ilioneus begs queen Dido in Book 1 ‘*prohibe infandos a navibus ignis!*’ (“keep the accursed fires from our ships”, 1. 525), the reminiscence of Troy engulfed in flames tinges his fear of ultimate destruction. Aeneas himself has used this word more than once to describe the sufferings of the Trojans. In his initial address to Dido, after seeing the images depicting Troy on Juno’s temple, Aeneas recognizes her as ‘*O sola infandos Troiae miserata labores!*’, “O you who alone have had compassion for the unspeakable sufferings of Troy” (1. 597). Most memorably, when he begins his narration of the fall of Troy at her request, it is his first word: ‘*Infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem!*’ (2. 3) “unspeakable, queen is the grief you bid me to revive”. In the course of his narration, Aeneas refers to Troy’s final moment as *infanda dies* (2. 132) “the unspeakable day”. *Infandum* is the adjective that Sinon employs to describe what happened to Palamedes (2. 84) and that Venus uses when confronting Jupiter about the experiences of the Trojans (1. 251); these deployments impart a sense of injustice from the speaker’s perspective. It is also the adjective the poet uses to refer to the Cyclopes (3. 644), a link which clearly associates Dido’s speech its epic predecessor. All these references thus serve to connect Dido’s curse to the fall of Troy, the suffering of the Trojans, and her epic precursor, Polyphemus. Tellingly, Vergil also deploys the adjective to describe the love to which Dido has succumbed (4.85) in an arresting description of Dido’s passion:

*illum absens absentem auditque videtque,
aut gremio Ascanium genitoris imagine capta
detinet, infandum si fallere possit amorem*

(Aen. 4. 83–85)

Lost as he is, she’s lost as well, she hears him, sees him
or she holds Ascanius back and dandles him on her lap,
bewitched by the boy’s resemblance to his father,
trying to cheat the love she dare not tell.⁹

In this passage, Vergil captures the true sense of *infandum*: “that which must not be spoken”. It is clear, at this point, that Dido wishes she had never set eyes on Aeneas. It is also significant that she uses this adjective modifying his head, and not his name, to refer to him; in contrast to Polyphemus learning and then using Odysseus’ name to curse him, Dido employs only a term that demonstrates her utter odium for Aeneas, replacing his name with a phrase that means that she will never again speak it.

Most significantly, her curse reflects suffering which she herself has known:

*si tangere portus
infandum caput ac terris adnare necesse est,
et sic fata Iovis poscunt, hic terminus haeret,
at bello audacis populi vexatus et armis,
finibus extorris, complexu avulsus Iuli
auxilium imploret videatque indigna suorum
funera; nec, cum se sub leges pacis iniquae
tradiderit, regno aut optata luce fruatur,
sed cadat ante diem mediaque inhumatus harena.*

(Aen. 4. 612–620)

⁹Vergil, *The Aeneid*. Trans. R. Fagles. New York 2006, 130.



If it must be that that unspeakable man sail to land and reach
 safe harbor, if the fate of Jupiter so demands, if this outcome is
 fixed: still, let him, exiled from his land, harassed by war and
 the weapons of a bold nation, and ripped away from the
 embrace of Iulus. . . let him beg for help and let him witness the
 undeserved deaths of his people; and after he has betrayed himself
 with the laws of an unjust peace, let him not enjoy his
 kingdom and the light we all love, but let him die before his
 time and lie unburied on a stretch of sand.

Scholars generally link her prophetic remarks to both later events in the poem and actual events in Roman history. As Page summarizes:

“The later books of the *Aeneid* tell how Aeneas was ‘harassed in war’ by the Rutuli, driven to leave his son, ‘implore aid’ from Evander, and accept a peace which sacrificed the name of Troy (12. 828), while other legends relate that after a brief reign of three years, he fell in battle and his corpse was undiscovered. The reference to Hannibal and the Punic Wars in 622–629 is obvious.”¹⁰

Notwithstanding these observations of the relevance of Dido’s curse to both the later events in the *Aeneid* and historical legend, Dido’s own experiences are what give this curse its biting venom. It is significant that much in her curse looks backward, not solely forward. She experienced the feelings of betrayal and loss when her brother murdered her husband;¹¹ she knows what it is like to be warned by the ghost of her beloved, deceased spouse that she is in danger and needs to leave her home, in the dark of night, to flee for safety;¹² she endured the heartache of exile and capably led her followers to a new home;¹³ she understands how it feels to be surrounded by hostility.¹⁴ Thus, these specific elements of her curse, while appearing prophetic from the perspective of Vergil’s audience, are grounded in the suffering she personally has experienced, and are details that the poet included earlier in the poem. Paradoxically, although her curse may appear to extend beyond any pain Aeneas has caused her (in other words, to ignore the bounds set by the *Lex Talionis*), her curse constitutes a measured reflection of her own circumstances. She wants Aeneas to feel the pain that she has suffered.

Vergil makes it clear that her curse is a proportional response by having Dido herself recognize, just before uttering her curse, that she could have treated him much more harshly:

*non potui abreptum divellere corpus et undis
 spargere? non socios, non ipsum absumere ferro
 Ascanium patriisque epulandum ponere mensis?*

Couldn’t I have torn apart his plundered corpse and scattered
 it on the waves? Couldn’t I have slaughtered his comrades, and
 Ascanius himself, and placed them on the table as a feast for
 his father?

(*Aen.* 4. 600–602)

¹⁰Page (n. 8) 389–390 (*ad vv.* 615–629).

¹¹*Aen.* 1. 348–350.

¹²*Aen.* 1. 353–357.

¹³*Aen.* 1. 360–368.

¹⁴*Aen.* 4. 39–44.



These images allude to the figures of Medea and Atreus, and demonstrate not only extreme and impious violence, but responses that exceed the limits of a reasonable reaction and are indeed criminal. By including such references, the poet brings out the much less violent, more appropriate nature of Dido's subsequent words.

Her wish that Aeneas “be harangued by the weapons and war of a bold nation” (*at bello audacis populi vexatus et armis*, 615) reflects the circumstances that Dido and Anna discuss at the start of Book 4 involving the hostile peoples who surround Carthage:

*nec venit in mentem quorum consederis arvis?
hinc Gaetulae urbes, genus insuperabile bello,
et Numidae infreni cingunt et inhospita Syrtis;
hinc deserta siti regio lateque furentes
Barcae. quid bella Tyro surgentia dicam
germanique minas?*

(Aen. 4. 39–44)

Haven't you thought about whose territory you have settled in?
On this side are the cities of the Gaetuli, a nation unconquerable in war;
there are the hostile Syrtes, and wild Numidians are all around; and on that
side is a swath of desert and the Barcae, who rage far and wide.
Shall I even mention the wars burgeoning in Tyre and your brother's threats?

This is the kind of dangerous predicament that Dido, having experienced it herself, wishes for Aeneas – an unsettled and unsettling existence, surrounded by hostile peoples. *Finibus extorris* (616), “exiled from his land”, likewise reflects this. She and Aeneas have both known the sorrows of being thrust from their homes under the threat of extinction; and even though he is still in a state of exile, she now seeks to impose it on him again.

Complexu avulsus Iuli (616), “ripped away from the embrace of Iulus”, is manifold with meaning, and the part of the curse that directly responds to Aeneas' abandonment of Dido. Most simply, it means “torn from one you love”. Dido's loss of her husband Sychaeus was devastating; since Aeneas has already lost Creusa (and Anchises), losing Iulus would be the most devastating loss he could now suffer. Furthermore, although Dido has no children of her own, she certainly had desired children, as she stated when she first learned that Aeneas was planning to depart:

*'saltem si qua mihi de te suscepta fuisset
ante fugam suboles, si quis mihi parvulus aula
luderet Aeneas, qui te tamen ore referret,
non equidem omnino capta ac deserta viderer.'*

(Aen. 4. 327–330)

At least if I had conceived a child by you before you left,
if I had a little Aeneas playing in the hall, whose features would still
remind me of you, I would not seem so completely imprisoned by this life,
and abandoned.

Despite the fact that she had no child by Aeneas, it is a loss that she acutely feels. Thus, her wish that Aeneas endure losing Iulus reflects her desire that he feel the loss and devastation she has felt, an isolation that can result only from the loss of loved ones, or of the promise for the future that they hold.



The next phrase of her curse, *auxilium imploret videatque indigna suorum / funera* (617–618), “let him beg for help, and let him look upon the unjust deaths of his people”, is something from which, in fact, Dido had saved Aeneas when his fleet landed in Carthage. Aeneas did not have to beg for help from Dido. Ilioneus and others had approached the queen before Aeneas’ arrival in Book 1, and Dido had already graciously offered assistance – and even the opportunity to share her kingdom – before Aeneas appeared:

*auxilio tutos dimittam, opibusque iuvabo.
vultis et his mecum pariter considerare regnis?
urbem quam statuo vestra est, subducite navis;
Tros Tyriusque mihi nullo discrimine agetur.*

(Aen. 1. 571–574)

I will send you away safely, with the aid you need, and I will assist you with resources. Do you wish to settle side by side in my kingdom? the city which I am establishing is yours. Draw in your ships. As far as I am concerned, Trojan and Tyrian will be deemed one and the same.

This significant moment, when Dido imagines the blending of their two nations, makes the final element of her curse (4. 624–629) – that of a hostile division between Tyrians and Trojans – that much more powerful. The harmonious union that the queen had envisioned, both between the two nations and later between Aeneas and herself, has become more than an unrealized dream: it has become a source of intense pain and anguish, involving not only the present population but emanating into the future.

Her next wish, ‘*nec, cum se sub leges pacis iniquae / tradiderit, regno aut optata luce fruatur, / sed cadat ante diem mediaque inhumatus harena*’ (4. 618–620), “and after he has betrayed himself with the laws of an unjust peace, let him not enjoy his kingdom and the light we all love, but let him die before his time and lie unburied on a stretch of sand” – is one which commentators frequently align with the loss of the Trojan name and events that occur beyond the poem’s close. What is most resonant here, however, are Dido’s experiences and what she knows of Aeneas. She had offered him a share in her kingdom. His rejection of that reign, and of Dido herself, she interprets not merely as his duty to follow his destiny but as a betrayal of her trust, a rupture of their union. Thus, she wants him to betray himself, as he has betrayed her; however, to betray himself to gain an unjust peace, an *iniquam pacem*, will intensify his suffering, for *iniquam*, “unequal”, indicates the subordination of the Trojans. This suggests that he will subject himself and his people to unfavourable circumstances – which Dido now realizes she herself has done. Fittingly, she wishes him to feel similar goads of hindsight: may he realize, once he has betrayed himself and his people, that they would have been better off had they remained in Carthage, for she now realizes that she and her people would have fared better had they not welcomed the Trojans. That he neither enjoy his reign nor a long life is also something that Dido herself, now in the moments before her suicide, will suffer; again, she envisions for Aeneas a counterpart to her suffering.

Dying *ante diem* is a curse for an unnatural, perhaps violent death, which Dido herself is about to endure. Vergil uses the phrase here and at the close of Book 4, when he describes her death: *nam quia nec fato merita nec morte peribat, / sed misera ante diem subitoque accensa furore* (697–698), “for she was dying neither in accordance with fate nor by a death she deserved, but wretchedly, before her time, possessed by a passion that came upon her”. Here the poet draws the connection between the death Dido is about to experience and the one she envisions for Aeneas. However, the final phrase, *mediaque inhumata harena* (620), “unburied on a stretch



of sand”, speaks to both Aeneas’ own heroic fear of dying ignominiously, unlauded, not receiving a hero’s funeral,¹⁵ and suffering beyond death, like all the unburied souls that yearn to cross the river Styx (*inops inhumataque turba*, the helpless and unburied throng”, 6. 325). Although Dido’s wording is different, the image arguably evokes that of Priam’s corpse which Aeneas himself described in his narration of the destruction of Troy: *iacet ingens litore truncus / avulsumque umeris caput et sine nomine corpus* (2. 557–558), “the enormous trunk lies on the shore, the head torn from the shoulders, a body without a name”. His body lies uncelebrated and nameless, due to its mutilation – a deeply degrading ending for the once prosperous and pious king. As Austin notes, “to die in one’s prime, and to die unburied – these were the most dreadful things that a man could suffer in ancient times”.¹⁶

The line that follows also recalls Priam, as it alludes to the scene in which the aged king witnesses the death of his son Polites, who *concidit ac multo vitam cum sanguine fudit* (2. 532), “fell and poured forth his life in a deluge of blood”. The fact that Dido speaks now of her own death, immediately following her wish for Aeneas’ demise, further associates her suffering with her curse upon him. At this point, however, Dido pivots from curses aimed solely at Aeneas to those which will involve both their peoples, Trojans and Carthaginians. Her words and sentiments here reflect not just those of an injured spouse or lover, but those of a leader, a queen. It is her position as a leader that enables her to call down this curse; such a thing could be done by no ordinary citizen.

*haec precor, hanc vocem extremam cum sanguine fundo.
tum vos, o Tyrii, stirpem et genus omne futurum
exerceat odiis, cinerique haec mittite nostro
munera. nullus amor populis nec foedera sunt.
exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor
qui face Dardanos ferroque sequare colonos,
nunc, olim, quocumque dabunt se tempore vires.
litora litoribus contraria, fluctibus undas
imprecor, arma armis: pugnent ipsique nepotesque.*

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(Aen. 4. 621–629)

These things I pray for, as I pour out my lifeblood along with this final utterance. Then you, my Tyrians, inspire your offspring and indeed your entire progeny to repeated acts of hatred, give this gift to my ashes. Let there be no love, no treaties, between our peoples. Whoever you are, as yet unknown to me – may you rise from my bones as an avenger, so that you may pursue the Trojan settlers with torch and sword; now, at some time, at whatever time it may be, strength will give itself to this task. I pray that our shores, against their shores, will clash, our waves against their waves, our weapons against their weapons: let his and our descendants do battle. . .”

¹⁵As he had expressed in his initial speech in epic: *O terque quaterque beati, / quis ante ora patrum Troiae sub moenibus altis / contigit oppetere! O Danaum fortissime gentis / Tydide! Mene Iliacis occumbere campis / non potuisse, tuaque animam hanc effundere dextra. . .* – “Oh three and four times blessed were those who met their deaths before the eyes of their parents, beneath the high walls of Troy! Oh you, Diomedes, bravest of the Greek nation, why could I not have fallen in the Trojan plains and lost my life by your right hand. . .?” (Aen. 1. 94–98).

¹⁶AUSTIN (n. 3) 180 (ad 4. 620).



Dido's call for the unending hatred and division between the two nations will be reflected in Aeneas' prayer for union between the Trojans and Italians in Book 12.¹⁷ The greater prophetic impact of this part of her curse lies, of course, in the historical events which later occur; but the verbal genius of Vergil's poetry provides an intensity that resembles an incantation. Dido frames this part of the curse with repetitions of *precor*, (621 and 629). She intensifies her speech with *hanc extremam vocem*, "this final pronouncement" that she vows to seal with the spilling of her own blood, soon to come. She then inserts the verb between the repetitions of shores, waves and weapons (*litora litoribus . . . / imprecor arma armis*), and the polyptota lend the sound of a solemn chant to her curse. In addition, the hypermetric ending (where her final syllable, *-que*, elides into the start of the following narrative line) makes her voice trail off, a feature which scholars interpret as an emblem of the unending nature of her enmity. This elision of her speech with the narrative arguably also reflects the blending of myth and history.

She refers to her call for vengeance as *munera*, which suggests not only a duty or a tribute offered to the dead but also a gift; it is a term which, via its common root with *munis*, suggests public service. Dido thus envisions her entire populace, present and future, as rising in common purpose to avenge the betrayal she has felt. *Nullus amor populis nec foedera sunt*¹⁸ (624), "let there be no love, no treaties between our peoples" elicits thoughts not only of the love for Aeneas that she wishes now to obliterate, but that the rupture of their relationship will be symbolically retained through centuries to come. Highet appears to deem her actions reasonable: "A queen cannot be taken and then cast away. Not to have avenged herself on the man who outraged her womanhood and her pride is unforgivable."¹⁹ This defense, however, does not account for her involvement of their two peoples. Because both are leaders of nations, and as such, figureheads, the rift between Dido and Aeneas dictates a division between their peoples, a clash that she elegantly expresses in the final two lines. It is in this aspect of her curse that Dido appears to transcend the boundaries of what is appropriate; yet, because she had offered to unite their two nations²⁰ and considered herself and Aeneas married,²¹ her sense of the rupture of their relationship, of his desertion of her, involves the abandonment of not only their personal union, but of the union of their peoples. Hence, even though her curse on their progeny seems to extend

¹⁷*non ego nec Teucris Italos parere iubebo / nec mihi regna peto: paribus se legibus ambae / invictae gentes aeterna in foedera mittant* (12. 189–191) – "I shall not command the Italians to obey the Trojans, nor do I seek kingly power for myself; let both nations, unconquered, submit themselves to equal laws and everlasting treaties."

¹⁸AUSTIN (n. 3) 180 (ad v. 624) notes that *sunt* "belongs to the language of laws from the Twelve Tables onwards". Dido words her curse in legalistic terms, as if pronouncing not only a curse, but a law.

¹⁹HIGHET, G.: *The Speeches in Vergil's Aeneid*. Princeton UP 1972, 181.

²⁰*vultis et his mecum pariter considerare regnis; / urbem quam statuo vestra est, subducite navis; / Tros Tyriusque mihi nullo discrimine agetur* (1. 572–574) – "Are you willing to settle in this kingdom equally with me? The city which I am establishing is yours, draw in your ships; as far as I am concerned, there will be no distinction between Trojan and Tyrian."

²¹*per ego has lacrimas dextramque tuam te / (quando aliud mihi iam miserae nihil ipsa reliqui), / per conubia nostra, per inceptos hymenaeos. . . / . . . / oro* (4. 314–316, 319) – "I beg you, by these tears, by your right hand (since I have left nothing else for my wretched self), by our marriage and the wedding rites we began. . ." AUSTIN (n. 3) (ad 316) 101 notes that "*Conubia* and *hymenaei* both imply legal marriage." While scholars generally note that the marriage in the cave allows for a great deal of uncertainty (e.g., W. R. JOHNSON calls the scene "deliberately confused and confusing impressionism" [*Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil's Aeneid*. Berkeley 1976, 163, n. 42]), it is clear from the text that Dido considers them married whereas Aeneas does not.



beyond what is reasonable, the queen envisions a divorce that involves their nations which, in her mind, is appropriate. And it is most important to recognize that these final moments, which are, according to ancient accounts, more closely modelled on the accounts of the historical Dido (that she nobly committed suicide on a pyre),²² portray Dido in her status as queen. When Aeneas first encountered her, she was demonstrating her capacity as a just and regal leader: *Iura dabat legesque viris, operumque laborem / partibus aequabat iustis aut sorte trahebat* (Aen. 1. 507–508), “She was issuing rights and laws to the people, and the toil for their public works she was either distributing in appropriate assignments or delegating by lot.”²³ It is worth noting Vergil’s emphasis on her sense of justice and fair methodology, which are brought out by the use of several words: *ius*, *lex*, *aequare*, *iustus* and *sors*. From the start of her portrayal, she is a just and fair leader. Despite the *furor* incited by her love for Aeneas (and his unjust abandonment of her), the curse she invokes reflects her sense of due measure: she simply wants him to experience the pain that she herself has suffered, pain that she perhaps pushed aside when she allowed herself to succumb to her feelings for Aeneas (a submission fostered by Venus, Juno and Anna), and which returned in overwhelming fashion when he deserted her.

The final hypermetric line is both arresting and symbolic of the manner in which the poet blends the words of his character with his own, combining legend and history as if to make them seamlessly intertwined. This unusual metric moment in the poem certainly calls attention to the importance of Dido’s speech even as it displays her emotional intensity. These elements, combined, constitute a passage of compelling force and complexity, and substantiate Austin’s claim that this speech “must surely rank with the most magnificent of any poet in any language”.²⁴ Within the text, Dido’s damning of Aeneas and Rome functions like a hinge linking the past with the future, myth with history, and epic with tragedy, as it turns on the axis of love and enmity, uniting a curse with an eventual blessing.

²²DESMOND (n. 1) 24–25.

²³Austin notes that the use of *viris* here reasonably refers to all individuals (not only men), but perhaps emphasizes her distinct role as a female leader. Cf. AUSTIN, R. G.: *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Primus*. Oxford 1971, (ad 1. 507) 170.

²⁴AUSTIN (n. 3) 173 (ad v. 590); ...“the speech has a Roman quality of implacable pride and command and purpose...”.

