

Anna Perenna in Vergil, Ovid, and Statius: A Curse or A Blessing?

PATRICIA A. JOHNSTON*

Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA

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ABSTRACT

The discovery of the fountain of Anna Perenna in Rome in 1999, and especially the presence there of curse tablets, establishes that she was known as a religious presence in the time of Ovid and, presumably, of Vergil. This paper seeks to examine the depictions we find of her in the works of Ovid, Vergil, and in Statius' *Punica* 8.

KEYWORDS

Roman traditions of Anna Perenna, Dido, Aeneas

In Vergil's *Aeneid*, Dido's sister Anna serves as her confidante (e.g. *Aen.* 4. 9–53)¹ and also as an intermediary between Aeneas and the Queen when their relationship begins to falter as Aeneas prepares to depart.² After the death of Dido, however, Anna's story does not end. In Ovid's *Fasti*

* Corresponding author. E-mail: johnston@brandeis.edu

¹In *Aen.* 4. 634 ff., Dido deliberately misleads Anna, concealing her plans for suicide, so that Anna there feels betrayed (4. 675–685). On the relationship of the two sisters, cf. *Heroides* 7.191–2 (Dido to Aeneas): *Anna soror, soror Anna, meae male conscia culpae, iam dabis in cineres ultima dona meos.*

²E.g., *Aen.* 4. 416–436; 437–449.

3. 559 ff., and then in Silius Italicus's *Punica* 8,³ we learn that after the queen's death, Iarbas and his Numidian forces invaded Carthage and drove Dido's Tyrians into exile on Malta,⁴ where they were initially welcomed by its king until the king was threatened by Pygmalion, Dido and Anna's evil brother. Consequently, Anna – following a pattern curiously similar to that followed by Aeneas – sets sail in search of a new land. She – like Aeneas – is overwhelmed by a storm at sea and is cast – conveniently – onto Italy's Laurentine shores. When Anna appears in Italy, however, there seems to be an uneasiness among some of those who receive her, in particular for Aeneas' new wife, Lavinia, who suspects that Anna may in fact be Dido in disguise. Is she really just a friend of her husband? Or does she represent some sort of curse or threat to those who receive her?

It is interesting to examine the later worship of Anna Perenna at Rome – what does she really represent to Romans? The recent discovery (in 1999) of the fountain of Anna Perenna in Rome⁵ included some 26 curse tablets. As Urbanova notes, the fountain dates back to the 4th century BCE, and two inscriptions found there, dedicated to *Nymphis sacratis Annae Perennae*, have been dated to the 2nd century CE,⁶ but it is possible that Ovid and Vergil were aware of her presence in Rome.

Aeneas' and Anna's trajectories are curious: Aeneas, while heading for Cumae, was driven by a storm from Northwest Sicily to Carthage, and after his affair with Dido returned to Sicily and then to Cumae; Anna sails to Malta (midway between Carthage and Southern Sicily, and then, while fleeing to Camarina on the southern tip of Sicily, is also driven by a storm, not back to Carthage – although she, like Aeneas, is driven by the South Wind (*Notus*) – but rather to Laurentine shores, namely, to the area just below the mouth of the Tiber. (Aeneas, of course, was also driven by all the other winds as well.)

By the time Anna reaches Italy, Ovid tells us, “Aeneas had already been ‘increased’ (*auctus* – a word that tends to suggest Augustus' new name) by the kingdom of Latinus and his daughter” (*iam pius Aeneas regno nataque Latini / auctus erat*, *Fasti* 3. 601–602). At the very time when Anna lands in Latium, Aeneas happens to be walking along the beach with Achates (in Silius Italicus' version, Iulus replaces Achates), a beach which Ovid pointedly refers to as the *litore dotali* (603), “the shore he had received as a dowry”. Anna's reaction is one of fear:

ante oculos miserae fata sororis erant (*Fasti* 3. 610)

her sister's fate [in the person of Aeneas] stands before her eyes.

³In Book 8, Juno sends the spirit of Anna, now the nymph of the river Numicius, to Hannibal who is upset about his forced retreat. Anna tells Juno of Dido's suicide, her flight to Cyrene after Iarbas' invasion, her escape to Italy and Aeneas from Pygmalion's fleet, and her transformation into a river from fear of Lavinia, then encourages Hannibal by prophesying to him the Battle of Cannae.

⁴In Silius Italicus' version, she flees first to Cyrene, whereas Ovid has her go directly to Malta.

⁵PIRANOMONTE, M.: *Il santuario della musica e il bosco sacro di Anna Perenna*. Roma 2002. The tablets were included in BLÄNSDORF, J.: *Die defixionum tabellae des Mainzer Isis- und Mater Magna-Heiligtums. Defixionum tabellae Mogontiacenses [DTM]*. Mainz 2012.

⁶URBANOVÁ, D.: Latin Curse Texts: Mediterranean Tradition and Local Diversity. *Acta Ant. Hung.* 57 (2017) 75.



But the Aeneas we see in Ovid, as in Vergil, is one who still sheds tears – here at the recollection of Dido – and still, as he did in his first appearance in the *Aeneid* speaks about death being a preferable solution to his sufferings – here with regard to having to leave Carthage:

*nec timui de morte tamen: metus abfuit iste.
ei mihi, credibili fortior illa fuit.* (*Fasti* 3. 617–618).

But I had no fear about death—that fear was far away.
But that other fear was stronger than one could believe!

Here too he utters an oath that is vaguely reminiscent of his words to Dido in the Underworld. His words to Dido in book 6 were:

*per sidera iuro,
per superos et si qua fides tellure sub ima est,
inuitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi,* (*Aen.* 6. 458–460)

I swear by the stars, by the Gods above and, if one can trust
What lies below the Earth, Unwilling, O queen, did I leave your shores!

His oath here, in the *Fasti*, however seems to place a lot more emphasis on his new land:

*per hanc iuro, quam quondam audire solebas
tellurem fato prosperiore dari,
perque deos comites, hac nuper sede locatos,
saepe meas illos increpuisse moras.* (*Fasti* 3. 613–616)

I swear by this land (*hanc tellurem*), which you once used to hear was given to me by a luckier destiny (*fato prosperiore*), and by the Gods that accompanied me (*perque deos comites*), and who are recently settled here (*hac nuper sede locatos*) but who (while I was at Carthage) often used to chastise my delay.

Ovid's Aeneas does graciously welcome Anna to Italy and he invites her to stay and enjoy the conveniences (*commoda*) of his new situation (*regni commoda carpe mei*). He takes her to his new home, where he explains to his wife, Lavinia: “I am handing this woman over to you, my wife Lavinia, out of a sense of duty (*pia causa*). When I was shipwrecked, she helped me. . . : I ask that you love her as you would a sister (*ut carae more sororis ames*)”:

*hanc tibi cur tradam, pia causa, Lavinia coniunx,
est mihi: consumpsi naufragus huius opes.*

...

quam precor ut carae more sororis ames. (*Fasti* 3. 629–630, 632)

Vergil's Lavinia, as Crescenzo Formicola has demonstrated,⁷ was characterized by her modesty; she would have quietly blushed and obeyed. In *Aeneid* 12, she responds to Turnus' impassioned address, to her father's stern reply, and to Amata's tearful announcement that she

⁷FORMICOLA, C.: Dark Visibility: Lavinia in the *Aeneid*. *Vergilius* 52 (2006) 76–95.



would rather die than let Aeneas marry her daughter – to which Lavinia she responds modestly, with a deep, deep blush:

*Acceptit vocem lacrimis Lavinia matris,
flagrantis perfusa genas, cui plurimus ignem
subiecit rubor et calefacta per ora cucurrit. (Aen. 12. 64–66)*

As Lavinia listened to her mother’s tearful words, her cheeks burned with flames (*flagrantis perfusa genas*).

Ovid’s Lavinia, however, is no longer the malleable, shy creature we saw in Vergil; rather, she is now a jealous wife and while she agrees to Aeneas’ request that she welcome Anna into their home, she conceals an imagined injury (*falsum volnus*) and silently (*tacita mente*) masks her anxiety. And while she observes that her husband offers many gifts openly, in her presence – *donaque cum videat praeter sua lumina ferri / multa* (*Fasti* 3. 635) – she suspects many more are given in secret (*clam quoque multa*, *Fasti* 3. 636). Whereas Vergil’s Lavinia would not question the decisions made by others, Ovid’s Lavinia is quite the opposite: she rages insanely (*furialiter*, *Fasti* 3. 637) – responding just as strongly as her mother did to adversity. And so she prepares a trap, and is ready, like Amata, to die for her cause. As Newlands observes, Ovid’s Lavinia responds with alarm to the threat of another woman in her house, who, for all Lavinia knows, may be Dido herself!⁸

In *Aeneid* 4, Mercury appears to Aeneas in a dream and warns him to flee – *Varium et semper mutabile femina* (*Aen.* 4. 569–570), the God tells him. In Ovid’s *Fasti*, Anna is also warned in a dream, but this time it is Dido who appears; her appearance is more reminiscent, however, of Hector as he appears in *Aen.* 2. 268–280 – sad, weeping, blackened with blood-soaked dirt (*aterque cruento / pulvere*, 272–273) after having been dragged by his chariot, his beard and hair matted with blood (278–279).

Dido, too, is covered with blood (*sanguinolenta*, *Fasti* 3. 640) and her hair is filthy and matted, (*squalenti. . . coma*, 3. 641) like Hector’s beard and hair (*squalentem barbam et concretos sanguine crinis*, *Aen.* 2. 278). And as she stands before Anna’s bed in the dead of night, she urgently warns her: *fuge, ne dubita, maestum fuge. . . tectum* (*Fasti* 3. 640) “Flee – don’t hesitate – flee from this house of sorrow!”

Anna heeds the warning even more quickly than Vergil’s Aeneas did—she jumped out the window “and stole away anxiously, . . . and ran like a deer frightened by wolves it has heard” (*currit ut auditis territa damma lupis*, *Fasti* 3. 646). Frightened and wounded deer are important motivators in the *Aeneid* in book four, where Dido is compared to one, and in book seven the death of Silvia’s deer sets off the great war in Italy. Anna, however, is at least not wounded, and appears to have been saved by the River God Numicius (*Fasti* 3. 647–648: *corniger hanc cupidus rapuisse Numicius undis / creditur et stagnis occuluisse suis*). Note that the Numicius, along with the Tiber, is one of the two rivers which, in the *Aeneid*, define the boundaries of Laurentum.

Anna’s absence, when discovered, is accompanied by *magno clamore per agros* (*Fasti* 3. 651) (compare the response to Dido’s death: *it clamor ad alta*, *Aen.* 4. 665). Searchers are eventually led to the river bank, where she herself “seems” (*visa est*, *Fasti* 3. 653) to appear to them in a vision and to identify herself:

⁸NEWLANDS, C.: Transgressive Acts: Ovid’s Treatment of the Ides of March. *CPh* 91 (1996) 320–338.



*ipsa loqui visa est placidi sum nympha Numici:
amne perenne latens Anna Perenna vocor.* (Fasti 3. 653–654)

‘I am the nymph of the peaceful Numicius: I hide in the eternal river
and therefore am called Anna Perenna.’

At once, Ovid tells us, they feasted happily in the fields through which they had wandered and now regularly fill the day and themselves with generous portions of food and wine. Thus Anna becomes a Roman Goddess, identified with the very river that identifies this particularly historic location for Romans, and also personifying the year and its recurrence through eternity. She is honored annually on the Ides of March (15th). Silius Italicus tells much the same story, but he sets it in the context of the second Punic War; there she is honored (*Punica* 8. 25–231) by Hannibal upon his arrival in Italy, as a fellow Carthaginian.⁹ In Ovid’s version she is closely identified with Aeneas, partly through their shared sorrow for Dido.

It is interesting that Vergil never mentions Anna Perenna, but he does name the river Numicius three times, in each case suggesting its importance, along with the river Tiber, to this particular locale. When Aeneas and the Trojans first land in the Laurentine fields in *Aeneid* 7, they discover, thanks to Iulus’ remark that they are eating their tables (*Aen.* 7. 116), which means that they have finally reached the *debita tellus* (*Aen.* 7. 120), their new *domus*, their *patria* (*Aen.* 7. 122). They joyfully make the appropriate offerings and the next morning they set out to explore Laurentum, which is often defined by the river Tiber to the north and Ardea to the south¹⁰ but also by the presence of this river:

*haec fontis stagna Numici,
hunc Thybrim fluvius, his fortis habitare Latinos* (*Aen.* 7. 149–150)

Here are the still waters of the Numicius,
here the river Tiber, and here the brave Latin people dwell.

The river Numicius¹¹ and the Tiber thus delineate the area populated by Latinus and his people. Soon afterwards we are informed by Ilioneus, who is negotiating with Latinus, that Dardanus, the source of the frequent Trojan epithet, was born here (*hinc Dardanus ortus*):

*sed nos fata deum vestras exquirere terras
Imperii egere suis. hinc Dardanus ortus,
huc repetit iussisque ingentibus urget Apollo
Tyrrhenum ad Thybrim et fontis uada sacra Numici.* (*Aen.* 7. 239–42)

But the decrees of the Gods commanded us to see your land. Dardanus who was born here, (now) returns and Apollo drives us toward the Tyrrhenian Tiber and the sacred shallows of the stream Numicius.

⁹Although Ovid allows that “opinion varies about the identity of the Goddess” (*Fasti* 3. 543; cf. 657–674), he focuses mainly on the version wherein this is Dido’s sister, Anna.

¹⁰*The Aeneid of Virgil, Books VII–XII.* Ed. by R. D. WILLIAMS. Macmillan 1973, ad 7. 47; cf. CORNELL, T. J.: *The Beginnings of Rome.* London – New York 1995, 296.

¹¹TILLY, B.: The Identification of the Numicius. *The Journal of Roman Studies* 26.1 (1936) 1–11.



hinc D. ortus first appears in Apollo’s prophecy in Book 3, where it is preceded by lines from Jupiter’s prophecy in Book 1:

*est locus, Hesperiam Grai cognomine dicunt,
Terra antiqua, potens armis atque ubere glaebae;
Oenotri coluere viri; nunc fama minores
Italiam dixisse ducis de nomine gentem. (Aen. 1. 530–533 = 3. 163–166)*

*hae nobis propriae sedes, hinc Dardanus ortus
Iasiusque pater, genus a quo principe nostrum. (Aen. 3. 167–168)*

In Apollo’s prophecy in *Aeneid* 3, Dardanus is said to come from Italy, but only in *Aeneid* 7 is there any implication that Dardanus is associated with this particular section of Italy, which, as mentioned above, is bounded by the Tiber and the Numicius. The other part of this prophecy, that they will find a land *potens armis* (in *Aen.* 1. 531 = 3. 164), is recalled at the close of the catalog of Latin warriors at the end of *Aeneid* 7 (799–802), where once again the Tiber and Numicius are linked to define this area:

*qui saltus, Tiberine, tuos sacrumque Numici
litus arant Rutulosque exercent uomere collis
Circaeumque iugum, quis Iuppiter Anxurus aruis
praesidet et uiridi gaudens Feronia luco;
qua Saturae iacet atra palus gelidusque per imas
quaerit iter uallis atque in mare conditur Vfens. (Aen. 7. 799–802)*

By linking this account of the later events of Anna’s life with those of Aeneas, Ovid elevates Anna, a secondary figure in the tragic tale of Dido and Aeneas, and at the same time seems to minimize the magnificence of the outcome of Aeneas’ epic struggle – who has been *auctus* to some degree (like Augustus) by “a luckier fate”. Ovid seems to be saying, “So this is what all that suffering – including on the part of Dido – was all about – so that you could marry into the comforts and conveniences (*commoda*) of a royal dowry (albeit accompanied by a jealous wife)?”

Anna, in the meantime, elevated now to an indigenous, eternal Goddess, celebrated every year “not far from your banks oh River Tiber” (*non procul a ripis, advena Thybri, tuis, Fasti* 3. 518), on the Ides of March (15th), would appear, for Ovid, to transcend the glory of Aeneas. The date of her celebration is of course also the date of the assassination of Julius Caesar. Carol Newlands points out that Ovid’s adoption of the Roman calendar as the subject of the *Fasti* implicitly sets him at odds with Augustus over control of time. Mary Beard has argued that the Roman calendar was restructured by Julius Caesar and Augustus not only to define and reaffirm Roman values, but also to enable them to reshape and identify with themselves Roman cultural values. Ovid’s interpretation of the Augustan calendar interweaves Roman national myths with the rich sexuality of ancient festivals, including this one, and thus, as W. R. Johnson suggests, provides us

“with a glimpse of ‘the authentic spirituality of old, vanished Rome’ with its ‘old carnal pieties, the worship of food, sex, and prosperity, and of the great and mysterious powers that bestow being and its enjoyment and responsibilities’ that had been displaced by the hollow modernisms and frigid festivities of Augustus.”¹²

¹²NEWLANDS (n. 8) 320; JOHNSON, W. R.: The Desolation of the *Fasti*. *CJ* 74 (1978) 7–18, esp. 16.



As Newlands observes, Ovid's

“discussion of the festival of Anna Perenna far outweighs the account of Julius Caesar's assassination and apotheosis, <with> 152 lines for Anna (523–696) and 14 lines for Julius Caesar (697–710). Although the Roman Goddess Anna Perenna is now largely forgotten, she is clearly an important figure in Ovid's *Fasti*.”¹³

Yet Ovid's lengthy discussion and account of her festival is interrupted and eventually displaced by Vesta's command <697–710> to the poet that he commemorate Julius Caesar's assassination and apotheosis, although, as Ahl argues, Ovid does appear to “‘rub some salt' into Julian wounds by treating the assassination and apotheosis of Julius Caesar in <this> cursory manner and by paying more attention to the spurious apotheosis of Anna Perenna.”¹⁴

It would appear, then, that Ovid's close echoes of Vergil further support the view that Ovid is perhaps not treating the traditional Julio-Augustan heritage in a manner suitable to the political realities of his own time (remember that he was writing the *Fasti* – which he never completed – when he was exiled by Augustus).

¹³NEWLANDS (n. 8) 321.

¹⁴AHL, F.: *Metaformations*. Ithaca 1985, 315; cited by NEWLANDS (n. 8) 321.

