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## VIRGIL'S DIDO AND THE DEATH OF MARCUS ANTONIUS

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*Abstract:* Virgil's account of the death of Dido at the end of *Aeneid* IV has been the subject of an appreciably extensive critical bibliography. What has not been recognized to date has been the influence of the tradition of the suicide of the former triumvir Marcus Antonius on Virgil's depiction of Dido's demise.

*Keywords:* Virgil; Dido; Marcus Antonius

The extended death scene of the Carthaginian queen Dido at the end of the fourth book of Virgil's *Aeneid* (IV, 659–705) has been justly celebrated as a *tour de force* in Latin epic versification, and has occasioned considerable critical commentary.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this short examination of the sequence will be to highlight a hitherto unappreciated historical allusion in Virgil's account of Dido's suicidal swordplay and its aftermath, namely its evocation of the tradition surrounding the death of the disgraced triumvir Marcus Antonius.

The scene is her palace at Carthage. Dido presses her face against her couch, and with memorable words of indignant contempt for Aeneas she stabs herself:

... et os impressa toro 'moriemur inultae,  
sed moriamur' ait; 'sic, sic iuvat ire sub umbras.  
hauriat hunc oculis ignem crudelis ab alto  
Dardanus et nostrae secum ferat omina mortis.' (IV, 659–662)<sup>2</sup>

The language of Dido's hortatory call to death is reminiscent of Aeneas' words to his followers in the midst of the ruin of Troy, where he called on them to

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from Virgil's *Aeneid* are taken from Conte 2009. Among the myriad commentary notes on the passage, immortal and unforgettable is the impassioned criticism *ad loc.* of Henry 1878. The literary antecedents in particular are exhaustively considered by Pease 1935, *ad loc.* For the tragic (especially Sophoclean) antecedents of the passage, see especially Clausen 2002, 101–107. There is a convenient overview of both *Vor-* and *Nachleben* for the Dido *mythos* in Binder 2000, 18–23.

<sup>2</sup> Virgil is somewhat vague about the exact location of Dido's wound; the one clue he provides is at IV, 689 *sub pectore*. For the fire imagery in the Virgilian depiction of the death scene note especially Buscaroli 1932, *ad loc.*

follow him to death in the maze of the burning city (II, 352–353 ... *succurritis urbi / incensae: moriamur et in media arma ruamus*). The physical act of Dido’s stabbing herself (and with Aeneas’ own sword, at that) is perhaps reflected in the repeated adverb *sic*.<sup>3</sup> If so, one might imagine that Dido haltingly makes two strikes with the weapon. Whatever the exact action by which she attempts her suicide, what becomes clear is that the act was botched; Dido is seriously wounded, but half-alive when her sister Anna rushes to the scene:

*semianimemque sinu germanam amplexa fovebat  
cum gemitu atque atros siccabat veste cruores.  
illa gravis oculos conata attollere rursus  
deficit; infixum stridit sub pectore vulnus.  
ter sese attollens cubitque adnexa levavit,  
ter revoluta toro est oculisque errantibus alto  
quaesivit caelo lucem ingemuitque reperta. (IV, 686–692)*

Anatomical precision, and ghastly in its vivid realism:<sup>4</sup> Anna seeks in vain frenzy to staunch her sister’s wounds, while air whistles out, as it were, through the terrible wound in Dido’s chest.<sup>5</sup> Dido is seemingly unable to die; at last the omnipotent goddess Juno intervenes by sending her rainbow herald and avatar Iris to hasten the queen’s death (IV, 693–705). Whatever else may be said of Dido, skill in the swift execution of her resolve to die proves elusive in her final crisis.

Throughout his depiction of the doomed relationship of Dido and Aeneas, Virgil plays on the contemporary historical reality of the fateful union of Marcus Antonius and Egypt’s queen Cleopatra.<sup>6</sup> Dido is as much a threat to the Trojan hero Aeneas as Cleopatra was to Rome’s Mark Antony; in marked contrast to Antony, Aeneas will escape the seductive threat posed by an African queen. Like Cleopatra, Dido will meet her end via suicide; unlike the Ptolemaic monarch, she will have a difficult, lingering death.

Indeed, the Virgilian depiction of the death of Dido is modeled not on that of Cleopatra, as on that of her Roman paramour, the disgraced Mark Antony.<sup>7</sup> So

<sup>3</sup> So Servius; cf. Austin 1955 *ad loc.* (“But it is not in Virgil’s way to let us see such horrors.”).

<sup>4</sup> “*stridit* ... accurately expresses the whistling sound with which breath escapes from the pierced lung” (Mackail 1930, *ad loc.*).

<sup>5</sup> Holzberg 2015, 231 renders well the description of Dido’s pulmonary injury: “... es dringt aus der Brustverletzung ein Pfeifen.”

<sup>6</sup> See here *inter al.* Hardie 2006, 25–41; cf. Stahl 2016, 223.

<sup>7</sup> We are bereft of much in the way of contemporary sources for the demise of Cleopatra and Antony, especially given the loss of Augustus’ memoirs and of such histories as that of Asinius Pollio. Suetonius (*Vita Augusti* 17.4) says that Antony was compelled by Augustus to commit suicide, despite his late hour attempts at securing a peace agreement (*Et Antonium quidem seras condiciones pacis temptantem ad mortem adegit viditque mortuum*). Antony figures but once in the *Aeneid*, in the dramatic depiction of the Battle of Actium on the shield of Aeneas (VIII, 685–

long as Aeneas was mired in his extended sojourn with Dido, he was awkwardly reminiscent of Antony with Cleopatra; once he is free of Carthage and the seductions of the queen, he is liberated from the Antonian image. Rather in the Virgilian manner, the image is at once transferred, as Dido becomes less like Cleopatra and more like Antony.<sup>8</sup>

The classic extant account of Antony's end is found in the biography of Plutarch (*Vita Antoni* 76–77).<sup>9</sup> Antony has just witnessed the betrayal of his cause by his naval force in the harbor at Alexandria; soon enough he is also betrayed by his cavalry. He retires to the city, complaining that Cleopatra had been treacherous to him, indeed that she had handed him over to those against whom he had fought for her sake:

τοῦτ' Ἀντόνιος ἰδὼν ἀπελείφθη μὲν εὐθὺς ὑπὸ τῶν ἰπέων μεταβαλομένων, ἠττηθεὶς δὲ τοῖς πεζοῖς ἀνεχώρησεν εἰς τὴν πόλιν, ὑπὸ Κλεοπάτρας προδεδόσθαι βῶν οἷς δι' ἐκείνην ἐπολέμησεν. (76.2).

In Plutarch, the naval “fiasco” (as Pelling rightly calls it) occurs after daybreak; the first sign of betrayal on what will be Antony's final day comes from his navy. In Virgil, soon after daybreak (IV, 585–585 *Et iam prima novo spargebat lumine terras / Tithoni croceum linquens Aurora cubile*) Dido sees Aeneas' Trojan fleet in harbor, ready to sail out in quest for a date with Hesperian destiny (IV, 586–587 *regina e speculis ut primum albescere lucem / vidit et aequatis classem procedere velis*). At once, she begins her rant against Aeneas (IV, 589 ff.).

Antony rails against Cleopatra; the queen flees to her tomb. In Plutarch her motivation is fear and despair; in the surviving account of Dio Cassius, the queen is portrayed as being possessed of a cold, calculating manner that invites Antony's suicide.<sup>10</sup> Plutarch's Cleopatra has a message relayed to Antony announcing her death; the Roman rues the fact that a woman has bested him in courage,

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688); see further Thomas and Ziolkowski, 2014, 98–99; also Della Corte 1984, 205–208; Reed 2007, 158–162.

<sup>8</sup> For the transference of image one may compare the rage of Juno that is inherited by Aeneas in the wake of her reconciliation in Book XII. The suicide of Cleopatra is alluded to by Virgil only at VIII, 697 *necdum etiam geminos a tergo respicit anguis*; cf. Horace, c. I, 37.25–32 (an ode in which there is no reference to Antony). The death of Cleopatra is thus referenced in surviving contemporary sources; for Antony we are rather less well served.

<sup>9</sup> All quotes from Plutarch are taken from Pelling 1988. It is impossible to determine with any certainty what sources Plutarch had at his disposal for his account of Antony's last hours, though it is reasonable to assume that at least the general outline of his version is reliable and trustworthy.

<sup>10</sup> 51.10.4–6. In Dio's version Cleopatra is explicitly credited with the fleet's reversal of sides. “At best his suicide had been a series of misunderstandings, but since both our main sources report that some of the confusion was deliberately crafted by Cleopatra, then it is hard not to believe that

and resolves at once to join her (76.2–3).<sup>11</sup> Our available sources occasion lively scholarly debate; a key problem is the question of what exactly Cleopatra wanted Antony to do. Whatever her intentions, Antony settles on the course of suicide.<sup>12</sup>

Antony is accompanied by a slave with the *nomen omen* of Eros; on a previous occasion he had secured Eros' agreement that he would assist in a suicide should the day come, but now, on the brink of death, the slave uses his sword on himself, leaving Antony to perform the deed solo.<sup>13</sup> Antony salutes the example of Eros before striking himself in the belly:

Πεσόντος δ' αὐτοῦ πρὸς τοὺς πόδας, ὁ Ἀντώνιος "εὔγε" εἶπεν "ὦ Ἔρωσ, ὅτι μὴ δυνηθεῖς αὐτὸς ἐμὲ ποιεῖν ὃ δεῖ διδάσκεις". Καὶ παίσας διὰ τῆς κοιλίας ἑαυτὸν ἀφήκεν εἰς τὸ κλι-  
νίδιον. Ἦν δ' οὐκ εὐθυθάνατος ἡ πληγῆ.

The wound, needless to say, like Dido's was not swiftly fatal; indeed Antony will live enough to make an eventual, arduous trip to Cleopatra's side.<sup>14</sup> The blood ceases to flow after Antony reclines; at once he begs bystanders to kill him. Instead they flee, and Antony lies there in agony until one Diomedes (identified simply as a γραμματεὺς) comes from Cleopatra with the order to bring him to her tomb.<sup>15</sup> After the difficult labor of bringing Antony to the queen's presence

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she planned to separate her own fate from that of Antony" (Goldsworthy 2010, 380). For commentary *ad loc.* on Dio's account see Reinhold 1988.

<sup>11</sup> The terse account of Velleius Paterculus (2.87.1) notes that in death Antony finally escaped the charge of cowardice: *Antonius se ipse non segniter interemit, adeo et multa desidia crimina morte redimeret*. Strabo says that Antony was compelled to commit suicide by Octavian (Geog. 17.1.10); cf. the same view in Suetonius.

<sup>12</sup> In this he joins a long list of other Roman worthies from the last generation of the Republic, from Cassius and Brutus to Cato. On the general topic note especially Grisé 1982, a work that seeks to dispel the notion that suicide was considered a fashion of the age as opposed to a useful expedient in impossible circumstances.

<sup>13</sup> Eros is more competent in the business of *Selbstmord*; he dies at one stroke (76.4). Eros is not named in Dio's version of the spectacle, which refers vaguely to one of the bystanders. Eros had agreed to assist in Antony's suicide; one could argue that "Eros" did just that insofar as Antony's passion for Cleopatra was his undoing and the source of his fatal *servitium amoris*.

<sup>14</sup> The late historian Orosius (6.19.17) records: *Deinde imminente Caesare turbataque civitate, idem Antonius sese ferro transverberavit ac semianimis ad Cleopatram, in monumentem in quod se illa mori certa condiderat, perlatus est*. With Orosius' *semianimis* of Antony cf. Virgil's use of the same adjective of Dido at IV, 686. Florus is characteristically laconic about the suicide (2.21.9 *Prior ferrum occupavit Antonius*). The epitome of Livy's lost Book 133 says that Antony committed suicide after the false report of Cleopatra's suicide. See further Huzar 1978, 226.

<sup>15</sup> 76.5. Pelling observes *ad loc.* that Plutarch does not fuss over the practical, logistical questions of how Cleopatra heard about the attempted suicide, or indeed how she managed to send an envoy. Diomedes (like Eros) appears nowhere else in the extant sources. Cleopatra would seek to stab herself in haste when she feared that Octavian's messenger Proculeius sought to take her

(complete with hoisting up the gravely wounded man to her window), Cleopatra tears her garments in lament and strikes her breast, indeed wiping off some of his blood to smear on her own face:

Δεξαμένη δ' αὐτὸν οὕτως καὶ κατακλίνασα, περιερρήξατό τε τοὺς πέπλους ἐπ' αὐτῷ, καὶ τὰ στέρνα τυπτομένη καὶ σπαράττουσα ταῖς χερσί, καὶ τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ αἵματος ἀναματτομένη ... (77.3)

We may compare here Anna's reaction to the death agonies of her sister Dido (IV, 673 *unguibus ora soror foedans et pectora pugnīs*). No mortal can avail the queen in the painful throes of her torturous end; it is only the intervention of the goddess Juno (a patroness, we might remember, of Carthage) via her intermediary Iris that puts an end at last to the misery.<sup>16</sup>

Plutarch's Antony interrupts Dido's laments and asks for a drink of wine, either, the biographer notes, because he was thirsty, or in hope of ending his suffering sooner (77.3).<sup>17</sup> Antony offers some final words of admonition to Cleopatra; his death in the end is almost imperceptible (77.4). In his summary of the death of Antony in the comparison of the Roman to his parallel Demetrius Poliorcetes, Plutarch concludes that Antony died in a cowardly, pitiable, and dishonorable way – but at least (unlike Demetrius) before his enemy could become master of his body.<sup>18</sup> Certainly Cleopatra's storied, serpentine spectacle of an end serves as a *melior* comparison for how to stage-manage a suicide.

One of the more delicate problems for the nascent Augustan regime was the question of how to address the civil aspects of the war between Octavian and Antony and Cleopatra. One way to respond to said difficulties was to portray the struggle as one between the Roman West and the barbarian forces of Cleopatra's East.<sup>19</sup> Antony's fatal error was to be associated with the Egyptian queen; any hint of the strife between fellow Romans would be subordinated to this clash of civilizations.<sup>20</sup> In Virgil, explicit reference to both Antony and Cleopatra comes

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prisoner; she would be disarmed before she could demonstrate greater efficiency with a blade than Antony had (79).

<sup>16</sup> IV, 693–705. Despite the act of Junonian mercy, darker undertones lurk; cf. Nelis 2001, 170–171 (for Iris as Medea); Stahl 1998, 291–292 (for associations between the Iris-Dido scene and the fate of Turnus); also Fratantuono 2013, 124 (on matters chromatic).

<sup>17</sup> Antony was of course notoriously bibulous.

<sup>18</sup> Velleius is more complimentary in his aforementioned appraisal of Antony.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Putnam 1998, 141–142.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. here VIII, 688, with the observations of Newman and Newman 2005, 88–89. Plutarch records that the last words of Antony were concerned with the matter of a Roman being vanquished by a Roman (i.e., via his suicide; we may well wonder these words were recorded). For Augustan propaganda (cf. e.g. Horace's ninth epode, vv. 11 ff.), the slavery of a Roman to a female commander is the preferred point of emphasis.

only on Vulcan's shield for Aeneas.<sup>21</sup> But through subtle and careful allusion, Virgil also reminds his audience of the fateful love affair of the doomed partners in death, as well as to the bungled suicide and lingering death of Rome's disgraced triumvir.

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<sup>21</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to consider the theory that the cavalry battle of *Aeneid* XI is modeled on Actium (with Camilla as Cleopatra and the wolf-like Arruns as Lucius Arruntius); on this see Fratantuno 2016, 82–93.