AENEID 4: SCENE INDIVIDABLE WITHIN POEM UNLIMITED

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In the introduction to his commentary on Book 4 of the Aeneid, Servius writes:

> sane totus [hic liber] in consiliis et subtilitatibus est; nam paene comicus stilus est: nec mirum, ubi de amore tractatur.

While this suggestion may strike us as itself comic,[1] it does point to the generic tensions that contribute to Book 4's harrowing effects. Virgil seems to confront us with a drama -- we would say a tragedy -- embedded[2] within an epic. Is this a useful way of talking about the 'Dido episode', and if so, what kind of responsion is there between the epic and the tragedy within it?

Book 4 is a tragedy in two senses that are relevant here. First, it has many points of formal contact with Greek tragedy, and second, its effects are like those of a Greek tragedy, eliciting the canonical pity and fear described by Aristotle.

Formal Similarities

Half of the book[3] is taken up by speeches, 21 in all, and many of the speakers remind us of characters in Greek tragedy. In her exchange with Aeneas, Dido recalls Euripides' Medea; in her first exchange with Anna and in her choice of suicide she is like Euripides' Phaedra. Anna recalls the stock character of the nurse from the Hippolytus, as does Barce later in the book. Frequent use is made of messengers. Iris appears at the close of

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[1]Pease (p. 7) attributes it to views of genre current in Servius' day; Denis Feeney sees a survival of ancient views of epic as a compendious genre. Servius' characterization plays no significant part in his subsequent commentary on the book, as Anderson points out.

[2]The term is Muecke's (p. 147).

[3]DeWitt and Pease (p. 9 ff) are good sources for these parallels, though their discussions are quite inclusive. For example, it is true that certain passages in the book seem lyrical, even choral, but do we feel here a primary connection, or is the impression secondary, dependent on the connection already made with tragedy by other more obvious means?

the book as dea ex machina and Dido's suicide is presented in tragic detail, right down to the indirect report (aspiciunt, 664) of the moment itself.[4] At many points in the book there are also references or echoes of particular tragedies.[5]

Virgil gives us two sly sanctions for this kind of talk, offering a tonic warning as he does so. At 1.337 Venus describes herself as wearing the coturnus,[6] the tragic buskin, and at 4.471 a strange simile compares the raving Dido to Orestes 'scaenis agitatus'. Pease's charming note to the latter line rejects attempts to emend 'scaenis' and accounts for the image by explaining that Virgil was 'a man of literary tastes' who wrote for others like himself. But surely in the first case, it is striking that Venus (a character, if we accept the tragic analogy) refers to an item of her costume, common procedure in 20th century theater, but doubly disruptive of genre here. So in the stage simile, the illusionism of the image is stressed by Virgil's use of the word 'scaenis', and the tragic image is even nested in a simile, that most epic of devices! In both cases, theater imagery is used in a way that calls attention to the genre-play that is going on, and the effect is in part to weaken the 'tragedy'. When we say this episode is tragic, we sometimes mean that it has emotional intensity and unity. And it does. But Virgil would remind us that a certain artificiality or distance enters in as well.

This is clear even at the level of the obvious resemblances discussed above. We have many speeches but "little of the give

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[4]See Clausen's discussion (p. 53 ff.), with full comparanda.

[5]Pease (p. 11, fn.77) lists the following:

301-304	Bacchae	607	Ajax
426	Iphegenia at Aulis	610	Trachiniae 910
602	Agamemnon	647	Ajax

[6]See Moles (p. 153) and Muecke (p. 135), both citing E.L. Harrison's "Why Did Venus Wear Boots?" PVS 12.

and take of real dialogue."[7] We have messengers, but at second glance, they are of the epic, not the informative tragic variety. Anna is very much like the Nurse in the Hippolytus, but she returns in the epic as she doesn't in the play, and returns again to mourn the dying Dido. Tragic elements are introduced to perturb the epic, but the plan of the epic in turn disrupts the tragic elements.

Effective Similarities

Tragedy, Aristotle tells us, is the imitation of a complete action that arouses pity for undeserved misfortune and fear that stems from identification. The best plot is a complex one that involves reversal and discovery: changes for the worse that are occasioned by some mistake. The best discoveries are those that proceed from the incidents of the plot. Every tragedy is part complication and part denouement.[8] Later critics have often seen the reversal as involving a collision between the hero and 'fate', and have also stressed that both reversal and discovery entail a reliance on irony as dramatic device.

Reversal and discovery are certainly words that fit well with Dido's transformation from happy, competent queen (talem se laeta ferebat/per medios, 1.503-4) to a suicide for whom all achievements are in the past. Interestingly, her change is in part from a terseness of speech (breviter, 1.561) appropriate to a queen, through stages of ample and desperate talk that contrast with Aeneas' speech (pauca, 4.333), to the trim epitaph of her final scene (4.651 ff.). Her reversal, then, is presented as a departure from proper political form, strangely captured in the fact that Aeneas' first speech to her and her reply (1.595 ff., 1.615 ff.) are exactly the same length. In hers, Dido points out that their fortunes have run side-by-side (similis fortuna, 1.628): until now. Her tragedy is the collision and divergence of those fates.

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[7]Pease p. 30.

[8]A digest of passages from Poetics 1452-1457.

The divergence is anticipated in the narrative, beginning with Jupiter's intervention to soften Carthaginian resistance. Dido's ignorance (fati nescia, 1.299) is dangerous to Aeneas only if Aeneas' fate is meant; the phrase is poignant because an awareness of her own fate would make her hostile to Aeneas, rather than helpful. When Dido is described later in the book as 'inscia Dido' (1.718), it is her fate that is meant: foreshadowing has replaced irony here. The cause of the shift, in a sense, is Venus' intervention, duplicating Jupiter's but prompted by renewed anxieties about 'Iunonia hospitia' (1.671-2). In Book 4 the foreshadowings gather (qualis cerva, 69; ille dies primus leti primusque malorum/causa fuit, 169-70) as the ironies thin out.

But what has caused the foreshadowed reversal? In what sense should it be attributed to 'some mistake'? Critics have long been tempted to see Dido's tragedy as precipitated by a 'flaw' in her character -- the once-popular translation of Aristotle's phrase -- and have derived encouragement from Dido's words to Anna (huic uni forsan potui succumbere culpae, 19) and from Virgil's evaluation of the wedding (coniugium vocat, hoc praetexit nomine culpam, 172). Dido's self-recriminations, culminating in 'facta impia' (596) would seem to point the same way, but must be balanced against Juno's final words (nec fato merita nec morte peribat, 696) and against the whole economy of divine intervention in the episode. It is simply wrong to say, of Dido's state of mind after her conversation with Anna, that "mentally Dido has already given in to Aeneas...the subsequent intervention of Juno and Venus only provides the occasion."[9] This would ignore the intervention of Amor at the end of Book 1. 'Non sponte', Aeneas' pathetic words, apply to Dido as well; but she is ignorant of their application. Rudd seems much closer to the mark in stressing that Dido's love is forced upon her,

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[9]Moles p. 155.

whereas her death is chosen.[10] Dido's love for Aeneas and desire for children (see especially 'parvulus' in 328) are politically proper and can stand against Dido's devotion to Sychaeus, her oath apart. Indeed, Aeneas felt a similar conflict between old values and new mission during Book 2. Seen in these terms, Dido's mistake was simply not to realize that "the relationship did not mean the same to Aeneas as it did to her."[11]

That difference in meaning relates very closely to the "economy of divine intervention" mentioned above, and brings us back to the disruption of genre discussed on page 2. It is not so much that the relationship didn't mean the same, as that meaning in Aeneas' life must derive from his political self, from the city he will found. Dido's city and Aeneas' city cannot be the same place. The force of the exchange between Juno and Venus is to pose the question: with whom will Aeneas blend his people and found a city? When Juno begs this question, postponing it until Book 12, and goes ahead with the marriage, the stage is set for the disaster. Virgil takes care to describe this disaster as the fall of another city: this is why Aeneas is asleep when Mercury comes to him (555) and why the reaction to Dido's death is like the sack of a city (669). Carthage of course will continue -- the point is not that Dido's death is a disaster for the state. It is rather that Carthage is not for Aeneas, any more than Troy can be -- recall Aeneas' strange reply to Dido (urbem Troianum, 342).

Notice that the reaction to Dido's suicide is also described in Bacchic terms (bacchatur, 666; ululatu, 667). These words bring us back through a whole system of Dionysiac reference to that strange simile I mentioned earlier:

> Eumenidum veluti demens videt agmina Pentheus,
> et solem geminum et duplices se ostendere Thebas,

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[10]Rudd, p. 52. So Muecke, comparing Dido to Oedipus in her acceptance of her fate (p. 151).

[11]Rudd's discussion is intuitive and sensible. He is very good on the systems of foreshadowing used in the book.

Seeing one city where there should be two is the mistake that Dido (and Aeneas) make, prompted by Venus and Juno. The mistake must be made, because (within the poem) Juno delayed in going to Jupiter, and because (outside the poem) Romans are Latins and the Punic War did happen. Though responsibility for the mistake is clearly shared, Aeneas is absent for most of the book, suffering the remoteness he complained of in 1.408-9: cur dextrae iungere dextram/non datur ac veras audire et reddere voces. The tone of this is rather like Juno's 'non licuit thalami expertem sine crimine vitam/degere more ferae, talis nec tangere curas' (550-1). Caught in a bizarre moral chiasmus[12] with their patron deities, Aeneas and Dido within the tragedy of Book 4 are the victims of the surrounding epic's larger concerns -- plot, or history, or fate.

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[12]Pease's phrase (p.52). Passionate goddess helps phlegmatic hero, connubial goddess helps passionate heroine.

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SCENES			SPEECHES				PARALLELS
1st line, # lines		Summary	Speakers			1st line, # lines	
297	8	Jp sends M					
305	20	A explores, V meets A	V	}	A	321 4	
325	10	A: what goddess are you	A	}	V	326 9	
335	37	V: D's story	V	}	A	335 36	
372	15	A: his story	A	}	V	372 14	
387	15	V: birds = lost ships	V	}	A	387 15	
402	16	A recognizes V; cloud	A	}	V	407 3	
418	23	they enter city; BEES	A			437 1	
441	53	Jn's grove; carvings	A	}	Ac	459 5	
494	26	D in; DIANA; Trojans in					
520	41	I: treatment, A, help	I	}	D	522 37	
561	18	D: welcome	D	}	I	562 17	
579	34	cloud out; A in; IVORY	A	}	D	595 16	
613	30	D: welcome; feast prep	D	}	A	615 16	
643	14	A sends for Asc, gifts					
657	38	V sends Amor instead	V	}	Am	664 25	
695	28	feast; Amor & D					
723	34	D's libation; song	D			731 5	
			D	}	A	753 4	
1	30	D: A is great, but...	D	}	An	8 21	
31	23	A: marriage is better	An	}	D	31 23	
54	36	omens; DEER; work stops					
90	15	J: how about marriage	J	}	V	93 12	
105	24	V: 1 city? J: cave	V	}	J	107 8	
			J	}	V	115 13	
129	31	hunt prep; APOLLO					
160	13	storm/marriage					
173	25	Fame spreads the story					
198	21	Iarbas complains to Jp	Ia	}	Jp	206 13	
219	19	Jp sends M to A	Jp	}	M	223 15	
238	43	M takes message to A	M	}	A	265 12	
281	15	A orders secret prep					
296	35	D raves and begs; THYIAS	D	}	A	305 26	
331	31	A defends himself	A	}	D	333 29	
362	31	D mocks and threatens	D	}	A	365 23	
393	23	ANTS; D to try again					
416	21	D: ask A to delay	D	}	An	416 21	
437	13	An asks A; OAK					
450	24	portents; dreams PLAYS					
474	31	D: pyre for magic	D	}	An	478 21	
505	17	prayers at pyre					
522	31	beasts sleep, D thinks	D			534 19	
553	18	in dream M spurs A on	M	}	A	560 11	
571	13	A wakes, casts off	A	}	men	573 7	
584	46	D sees fleet; curses A	D			590 40	
630	76	D sends for An; epitaph	D	}	Bar	634 7	
			D			651 8	
		An mourns; sky	An	}	D	675 11	
693		J sends Iris; D dies	Ir	}	D	702 2	