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ARISTOTLE AND DIDO'S *HAMARTIA*

By J. L. MOLES

Scholars have long recognized that the story of Dido in the *Aeneid* is structured like a Greek tragedy and that several of Aristotle's concepts in the *Poetics* can profitably be applied to it. Here I return to an old question, to which no answer yet given has commanded general assent: if Dido is a tragic heroine, what, in Aristotelian terms, is her *hamartia*? I shall argue that Aristotle's model of tragedy provides a useful blueprint for gauging both Dido's moral responsibility for her downfall and the moral and emotional response to it which Virgil expects from his readers.[1] These matters have indeed been very extensively discussed by very distinguished scholars, but in many areas of classical literature – and nowhere more than in the *Aeneid* – modern criticism has become so sophisticated and so attuned to the detection of subtleties such as irony, ambiguity, and ambivalence that it sometimes misses the significance of what is simple and obvious. Aristotle's model of tragedy, while not a refined critical tool,[2] helps us to isolate some basic truths about the tragedy of Dido.

I begin with an exposition of the relevant parts of Aristotle's analysis,[3] because even today much of it is often imperfectly understood.

Aristotle, quite reasonably, takes it for granted that the plot of most tragedies revolves round a single central figure, and that it is primarily his or her change of fortune or *metabasis* (a change usually, though not necessarily, from good fortune to bad) which arouses the requisite pity and fear in the audience. (This does not imply that other figures in the drama are of no significance. The actions and sufferings of the central figure have to be seen in relation to those of others.) The central figure must be 'of high repute and great good fortune' (*Poe.* 13.1453a 10), so that his change of fortune may be more extreme, hence more dramatic. That apart, the successful arousal of pity and fear depends on two main factors: (1) the audience must be able to identify with the central figure, so that they are emotionally affected by his sufferings and (2) the central figure's change of fortune must broadly satisfy what Aristotle describes as τὸ φιλάνθρωπον (*Poe.* 13.1452b 38, 1453a 2–3) – 'human feelings', or, in effect, the sense of natural justice that we feel as human beings.[4] These two requirements have profound implications for the characterization of the central figure.

Aristotle seems to believe that as a general rule we identify with people who are neither *very* good nor *very* bad, but somewhere in

between, people who are 'like ourselves' (ὅμοιος, *Poe.* 13.1453a 6).[5] But it is desirable that the central figure should be 'better rather than worse' (*Poe.* 13.1453a 15–16): the emotion generated by the downfall of such a person will be greater because it is human nature to be more affected by the downfall of the good. Since also pity is aroused by *undeserved* suffering (*Poe.* 13.1453a 4, ἀνάξιον ... δυστυχοῦντα), there must be a degree of *disproportion* in the sufferings of the central figure: he must suffer beyond his deserts. Yet this disproportion must have a limit, otherwise the affront to our sense of natural justice becomes too great and we feel 'moral revulsion' (τὸ μιαρόν, *Poe.* 13.1452b 36) rather than pity and fear.

The ideal tragic figure is therefore 'the man between these' (sc. the poles '*very* good' and '*very* bad'). 'He is one who is not pre-eminent in moral virtue, who passes to bad fortune not through vice or wickedness, but because of some *hamartia*' (*Poe.* 13.1453a 7–8); again, 'the change of fortune should be produced not through wickedness, but through some great *hamartia*, on the part of such a person as I have described, or a better one rather than a worse' (*Poe.* 13.1453a 15–17).[6]

Here we confront the notorious problem: what does Aristotle mean here by *hamartia*? The old view was that *hamartia* refers to a 'flaw of character', the modern view (at least until recently) that it means 'error', 'mistake of fact', that is, an act done in ignorance of some salient circumstances, in effect an error of identity (e.g. Oepidus' killing of Laius in ignorance of the fact that Laius was his father). But our understanding of Aristotle's concept of *hamartia* has been greatly advanced by an excellent study by T. C. W. Stinton, which appeared in 1975.[7] Stinton demonstrates conclusively that *hamartia* can have a very wide range of application indeed. It can refer not only to 'mistakes of fact', but also to acts done under the influence of passion, to acts done through weakness of will (ἀκρασία), to 'mixed acts' (i.e. wrong acts done for the sake of a greater good), and/or to the various dispositions or characters that correspond to these various kinds of acts.

So interpreted, *hamartia* fulfils the general requirements of *Poetics* 13 in the following ways:

(1) There is a direct causal connection between the actions of the tragic agent and his downfall – his downfall is not arbitrary (this does not *necessarily* imply that he is morally culpable to any degree).

(2) Whatever the precise nature of his *hamartia* (and, as we have seen, the range of possibilities is large), in every case it must fall short of 'vice or wickedness' and it must be possible to make a plea of mitigation for it. In some cases (certain kinds of 'mistakes of fact'), no moral culpability at all may attach to the *hamartia* of the tragic agent. In most cases, there will be some moral culpability, which will vary

according to the particular circumstances, but in all cases there must be *some* exonerating factors.

(3) Our sense of natural justice is satisfied, because:

(a) in *all* cases there is a causal connection between the central figure's actions and his downfall;

(b) in cases where some moral culpability attaches to the agent, we feel that his downfall is, to some extent, just;

(c) in cases where no moral culpability at all attaches to the specific *hamartia* of the tragic figure, he is given some unattractive qualities (e.g. Oedipus' tyrannical bent and volcanic temper) which ensure that we are not *outraged* by his fall into misfortune, even if, on a cool assessment, it would seem unjust.

(4) We nevertheless feel that the central figure has suffered beyond his deserts, is ἀνάξιος δυστυχῶν, because in all cases there are some mitigating circumstances for his actions.

Aristotle's model therefore takes account of many different types of tragic situation. His emphasis on the *hamartia* of the tragic agent also focuses on one of the most important concerns of tragedy – at any rate, of great tragedy: *moral choice*. For his model requires the audience in turn to make moral judgements about the rightness or wrongness of the tragic figure's behaviour and the justice or injustice of his fate.[8] This necessarily involves consideration of the tragic agent's *hamartia*, which in turn requires scrutiny of his motivation in committing the *hamartia* and hence also of his character (on Aristotle's definition, character – *ethos* – is 'that which makes plain the nature of the *moral choice* – *prohaeresis* – the personages make', *Poe.* 6.1450b 8–9).

Let us now apply Aristotle's prescriptions to the tragedy of Dido.

In the story of Dido and Aeneas the focus is primarily upon Dido: she corresponds to the central tragic figure of the Aristotelian model. As a queen and the founder of a city, whose downfall is great, she fits into the category of 'those who are of high repute and great good fortune' but 'pass to bad fortune'. Her character has of course been very variously assessed, yet most of us will agree that, in Aristotelian terms, she is 'like us', in being somewhere 'between' the poles '*very* good' and '*very* bad'. On the one hand, she is a dutiful ruler, she treats Aeneas and the Trojans with sympathy, kindness, and hospitality, she is devoted to her sister and feels love and loyalty to the dead Sychaeus, and so on; on the other, she is over emotional, neglects her public duties in her distraction over Aeneas (*Aen.* 4.86ff.), succumbs to 'furor', engages in dubious magical rites, and curses Aeneas at the end. Yet, on balance, she is surely 'better rather than worse'.

What is her *hamartia*?

She has fallen in love with Aeneas, but this indeed is hardly her fault,

for it has been brought about through direct divine intervention and forced upon her. It is true that her passion for Aeneas is also psychologically plausible on the human plane, but on either level this is a love from which there is no escape – 'moral choice' (*prohaeresis*) does not come into it. But, given that she has fallen in love, she now has to make a decision: what should she do about it? – and this question is extensively discussed by her and her sister. This is indeed a matter for 'moral choice', on the Aristotelian model. And Dido makes her choice when she and Aeneas meet in the cave:

> speluncam Dido dux et Troianus eandem
> deveniunt. prima et Tellus et pronuba Iuno
> dant signum; fulsere ignes et conscius aether
> conubiis, summoque ululârunt vertice Nymphae.
> ille dies primus leti primusque malorum
> causa fuit; neque enim specie famave movetur
> nec iam furtivum Dido meditatur amorem:
> coniugium vocat, hoc praetexit nomine culpam.
> (*Aen.* 4.165–72)

Since the story of Dido and Aeneas as a whole is conceived as a tragedy, it seems legitimate to analyse this key scene in specifically tragic terms.[9] Here we have the climactic moment, the moment of decision. The decision is made, and Virgil himself steps out of the narrative and pronounces his own judgement, almost in the style of a tragic chorus. As in tragedy, the author demands a moral response from his audience. The sentiment 'ille dies primus ... malorum causa fuit' also reflects the ἀρχὴ κακῶν ('beginning of evils') motif so basic to the thought and narrative patterning of Homeric epic and Greek tragedy.[10]

In itself the word 'culpa' can cover a wide range of failings – from the trivial to the great,[11] and it takes its precise meaning from its context. In both respects it resembles *hamartia*. Since (a) the whole story of Dido and Aeneas is a 'tragedy', (b) the specific context responds to 'tragic' analysis, and (c) 'culpa' is a suitable Latin equivalent for *hamartia*, Virgil here seems to be telling us, almost in so many words, that Dido's 'culpa' was her *hamartia*.[12]

What, then, is it? In context it makes no sense to think of some general 'moral flaw': one cannot 'praetexo' a 'moral flaw' by calling it 'coniugium'! Quite clearly, her 'culpa' is her act in giving herself to Aeneas. But in what respect is this a 'culpa'? One popular interpretation has been that the 'culpa' lies in her abnegation of her oaths to Sychaeus. Yet this makes no sense in context. To defend herself against criticism Dido calls her 'culpa' a 'coniugium'. Her 'culpa' cannot be disloyalty to Sychaeus, for *any* association with a man, whether licit or illicit, *necessarily* involves abnegation of her oaths to Sychaeus and to protest

that her association with Aeneas was a 'coniugium' does nothing at all to meet that charge,[13] as indeed Dido herself has already recognized (*Aen.* 4.15–19). In a more refined version of the interpretation of 'culpa' as = 'disloyalty to Sychaeus', Gordon Williams argues that 'the words can just as well mean this: what Dido was doing was culpable, but this fact was concealed by her regarding it as marriage'.[14] But this still fails to meet the logical objection that Dido's regarding what she was doing as marriage has no bearing on her feelings of obligation to Sychaeus. Even more important, Virgil's words clearly imply that Dido is behaving badly and knows it: she 'is no longer influenced by appearances or reputation; no longer is it a secret love she practises. She *calls* it marriage – with this *name* she *conceals* her "culpa".' Dido, now shameless, *says* something (she does not just 'regard' it) which is not true. Virgil draws a clear contrast between Dido's *outward* behaviour and the *inner* reality.

The obvious meaning of Virgil's words is that the 'culpa' consists in the *illicit* nature of her love-making with Aeneas, which Dido, to defend her reputation, tries to present as proper 'coniugium'.[15] 'Culpa' of course very often refers to sexual misbehaviour[16] – a thoroughly appropriate implication in a context where two people have just made love and the woman is criticized for shamelessness. Some scholars, indeed, preeminently Gordon Williams, have strenuously resisted this simple conclusion. Williams[17] argues that (a) Juno refers to the union of Dido and Aeneas as a proper marriage (*Aen.* 4.99, 103–4, 125–7); (b) the responses of the elements, Juno, and the nymphs to the 'wedding' are ritually correct; (c) in Roman law and social practice cohabitation and consent were sufficient to validate a marriage; (d) Dido later regards her relationship with Aeneas as marriage; (e) in Ovid's treatment of the incident in the cave (*Heroides* 7.93–6) Dido at the time sincerely regards herself as having become Aeneas' wife. All these observations are correct in themselves, but they do not validate the conclusion that Dido is acting in good faith. For her own purposes Juno desires the union of the two lovers to be a permanent marriage: this does not amount to an objective statement of the nature of their union. While the divine responses to the 'wedding' are indeed ritually correct, the *emotional* effect is of a ghastly parody of the norm, suggesting rather that this marriage presided over by Juno is not a true marriage at all.[18] As for the point about Roman marriage practice, at this juncture in the narrative Dido and Aeneas are not yet cohabiting: they have only made love once! Nor, as we learn later, even as time passed, did Aeneas ever give his consent. Nor are Dido's *subsequent* thoughts about her *prolonged* cohabitation with Aeneas relevant to the immediate context. Finally, though Ovid is certainly recycling Virgilian material in *Heroides* 7, it is

wholly illegitimate to invoke his 'authority' in support of a contentious interpretation of Virgil's meaning: Ovid is not bound to follow Virgil in every respect.

In sum, Virgil's wording in verses 165–72 shows quite clearly (a) that the union of Dido and Aeneas is *not* a proper 'coniugium', (b) that it is a 'culpa' (in the sense 'sexual misdemeanour'), and (c) that at this point Dido knows that she is not married to Aeneas but pretends to the world that she is to avoid disgrace. Dido's 'culpa' or *hamartia*, then, consists precisely in her submitting sexually to Aeneas out of wedlock. In Aristotelian terms, this may be defined as a wrong act committed through weakness of will because of her passion for Aeneas. It is this *hamartia* which sets in motion the chain of events which produces her 'change of fortune' to ill fortune, as Virgil himself indicates ('ille dies . . .'). There is a direct causal link, as Aristotle requires, between Dido's *hamartia* and her *metabasis*. Her act is culpable, but it is not an act of 'vice or wickedness': there are some exonerating circumstances and a fair plea of mitigation for her conduct can be made (she is in love, not fully in control of herself, and so on). But Dido's 'passing' into 'misfortune' does fulfil the requirement of 'human feeling', for her downfall is to some extent the result of her own wrong-doing: it is basically just. Yet there is also the necessary tragic *disproportion* between fault and fate to arouse our *pity* (*Aen.* 4.696, 'quia nec fato merita nec morte peribat'; cf. 4.693, 'tum Iuno omnipotens, longum *miserata* dolorem').

All this is of course a considerable simplification of the tragedy of Dido. Nevertheless, we can see that the Aristotelian model of tragedy does enable us to pin-point the essential nature of Dido's 'culpa'/*hamartia* and to establish the broad parameters of the moral and emotional response to her downfall which Virgil wants from us.

Finally, a few brief observations on the reasons why Virgil chooses to represent the liaison of Dido and Aeneas, whatever its ultimate status, as beginning in sexual misconduct. Such a detail might seem gratuitous: after all, any emotional entanglement between Dido and Aeneas is bound to end unhappily. In fact it serves several purposes. It is inconceivable that Aeneas could have considered marriage with Dido had it been offered to him in the proper way, whereas it is both realistic and psychologically convincing that he should drift into a relationship with Dido after both have succumbed to temptation in the cave. From the point of view of the plot Dido's seduction is in fact a *sine qua non* of Aeneas' staying on with her in Carthage at all. Again, the fact that their liaison begins with seduction sheds a critical light on Dido's love for Aeneas, Aeneas' response, and indeed upon the emotion itself: however sympathetically Virgil may portray its victims, love is a passion, often destructive in its effects and ignoble in its manifestations. The states-

man must avoid it, or, if he becomes enslaved by it, free himself from its toils as soon as possible. Hence *Aen.* 4.393: 'At pius Aeneas.' Those words are no aberration but the emphatic judgement of Virgil the moralist at his most explicit.[19]

NOTES

1. For the relevance of tragedy and Aristotle's prescriptions to the Dido story, see most recently F. Muecke, *AJP* 104 (1983), 134–55 (with full bibliography). N. Rudd, *Lines of Enquiry* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 32–53, surveys various interpretations of Dido's 'culpa'/*hamartia* and concludes on an agnostic note. Whether Virgil had read the *Poetics* naturally cannot be established. It is chronologically possible that he had, even if one believes that Aristotle's major treatises went out of general circulation in the Hellenistic period: cf. D. Earl, *ANRW* I.2 (1972), pp. 850ff. on the date of their re-emergence in Rome. On the other hand, C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry* I (Cambridge, 1963), p. 140 finds 'no evidence of any first-hand knowledge of Aristotle's *Poetics* in Horace's time'. What matters here is that Aristotle's prescriptions seem to work both with Greek tragedy and the story of Dido and that they *had* currency in early Augustan Rome, though perhaps only through intermediaries such as Neoptolemus.

2. It is of course not meant to be: Aristotle is trying to define the essence of tragedy, necessarily a process of simplification and generalization.

3. I here follow the views of T. C. W. Stinton, *CQ* 25 (1975), 221–54, with my own modifications in *CQ* 29 (1979), 77–94.

4. For this interpretation of τὸ φιλάνθρωπον, cf. M. E. Hubbard in *Ancient Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 1972), p. 106 n. 2; Stinton (n. 3), 238 n. 2.

5. ὅμοιος certainly implies 'not very bad'; whether it also implies 'not very good' (as usually argued) is less clear: see my discussion (n. 3), 92–4.

6. Translated by Hubbard (n. 4), pp. 106–7, except that I have left ἁμαρτίαν as it stands.

7. Cf. n. 3 above.

8. I stress here (since this is often misunderstood) that Aristotle's view of the moral element in tragedy is radically different from Plato's. Aristotle does *not* require that tragedy should be morally improving: his point is that if the plots of tragedy do not harmonize, more or less, with the audience's moral sense, this interferes with the *aesthetic* purpose of tragedy – the arousal of pity and fear.

9. Cf. the interesting observations of J. Foster, *PVS* 13 (1973–4), 32.

10. According to G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), p. 379, the wording echoes 'the last words of the Spartan ambassador at the end of the last peace conference before the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides ii. 12.3)'. Maybe so, but the colouring of the Spartan ambassador's words is itself epic/tragic, and this colouring is what is important in our passage.

11. See *ThLL* and *OLD* s.v.

12. Most scholars assume this equivalence.

13. For similar arguments, cf. R. C. Monti, *The Dido Episode and the Aeneid* (Leiden, 1981), p. 106–7 n. 29.

14. Williams (n. 10), p. 379.

15. Cf. Monti (n. 13), loc. cit.

16. *ThLL*, s.v., IV, col. 1302, 67–1303, 18.

17. Williams (n. 10), pp. 378ff.

18. Page, ad loc. has some characteristically good observations.

19. It will be clear why I completely disagree with the arguments of S. Farron, 'The Aeneas-Dido Episode as an Attack on Aeneas' Mission and Rome', *G & R* 27 (1980), 34–47. Nor can I accept the 'morality is irrelevant' attitude of D. Feeney, *CQ* 33 (1983), 205 n. 10 ('it is not a matter of "judging", still less of deciding which "side" we favour'). In Book 4, vv. 169–72 and 393 are *explicit* moral 'sign-posts'.