Thinking of Dido, what comes immediately to mind is her fatal passion for Aeneas, immortalised by Virgil and often revisited by poets, playwrights, artists, musicians. We think of Marlowe and Berlioz, of Giaquinto and Jodelle, of Giraldi Cinthio and Purcell, of Metastasio and Cayot ... all variously depicting the love-and-death, seduced-and-forsaken version of the Carthaginian queen’s story. The list could go on and on, for it is thanks to Virgil that this ‘oriental’ and ‘African’ queen has won a place in the repertory of images of Western culture; her tragedy in the Aeneid, a tragedy born of her uncontrollable love in conflict with Aeneas’s loyalty to his divine mission, has moved to tears generations of readers, while also teaching the virtues of responsibility and self-control—for example in Renaissance England, where its political lesson was re-signified both to praise and advise Elizabeth I.

But in another story, circulating well before the Aeneid, Dido is the protagonist of a foundation myth all of her own. There, she is not the temptation of a hero called elsewhere by his divine mission, nor is she a broken woman, prey to the gods and to her emotions. Chastity, faithfulness, wisdom, political cunning, courage are the virtues of this other Dido. Her story is partly narrated by Venus in the Aeneid, only to have a different ending due to Cupid’s intervention—and especially to Virgil’s plans for an epic celebrating Rome’s greatness and Augustus’s just rule. Initially, Virgil does endow his queen with some of those virtues: before she meets Aeneas, Dido—dux femina facti—leads to the African coast and to safety the Tyrians who want to escape Pygmalion’s
cruel tyranny, and under her rule Carthage is built and prospers. As beautiful as chaste Diana

‘Talis erat Dido, talem se laeta flerebat
per medios, instans operi regnisque futuris.
... 
iura dabat legesque viris operumque laborem
partibus aequabat iustis aut sorte trahebat.’

(‘Such Dido was; with such becoming state
Amidst the crowd, she walks serenely great.
...
She takes petitions, and dispenses laws,
Hears and determines ev’ry private cause.’)

Then, inflamed by Cupid’s dart, she abandons herself to love, her responsibilities forgotten, and wanders through the city coniecta cerva sagitta (‘a hind stricken with an arrow’); but Aeneas leaves her to answer the call of duty, and there is nothing left for passionate Dido but to kill herself in despair.

In the Phoenician myth, on the contrary, the Trojan prince does not appear, and the queen’s suicide is motivated by her will to protect her city and keep faith with her husband’s memory. This older story has also lived through the centuries: its first remaining occurrence is in a fragment by Timaeus of Tauromenium (third century BC) quoted an anonymous Greek catalogue of women; while a much longer version, included by

1 Cf Virgil Aeneid 1.340-68, 419-29.
2 Virgil Aeneid 1.503-4 and 507-8.
3 Felix Jacoby Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker 566 F 82: in this fragment Timaeus says that the Phoenician name of Helissa/Dido was Thiosso,
Virgil’s contemporary Pompeius Trogus in his *Historiae Philippicae*, is preserved in the well known *Epitome* by Justin. In the first centuries AD, when Christian thought begins to appropriate and transform the Roman tradition, both versions of Dido’s story are used for moral purposes; thus, referring to the Phoenician legend, she is cited as a positive model of *secunda virginitas* and Christian widowhood, both by Tertullian and by Jerome. Reversing Paul’s dictum *Melius est enim nubere quam uri* (‘It is better to marry than to burn’), they praise Dido as a martyr to her chastity, who burned herself rather than marry again; though Jerome introduces the Virgilian Dido as well—quoting from the *Aeneid* but not mentioning her name—to illustrate the despair of an inconstant widow.

About ten centuries later, Boccaccio would also use both versions, variously returning to Dido in different writings; at times privileging the passionate and abandoned queen, for example in *Amorosa Visione* and *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*; at times, as in *De mulieribus claris* and *Decasibus virorum illustrium*, echoing the moral, exemplary use of the older story made by the Fathers of the Church; and actually including both versions in *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, where he underlines the difference between the poetic and the historical one, and asserts Virgil’s right to invention. On the contrary, Petrarch consistently chooses the

and that rather than marry the Libyan king, she had a pyre built and lit outside her house at Carthage, then leapt from the house on to it.


6 1 Corinthians 7.9.
chaste queen, in open refutation of the false and injurious story of her passion for Aeneas, as in his Trionfo del Pudore: 8

‘per lo suo diletto e fido
sposo, non per Enea, volse ire al fine.
Taccia il vulgo ignorante! io dico Dido,
cui studio d’onestate a morte spinse,
non vano amor come e’ il publico grido.’

(‘for her belov’d and faithful spouse, not for Aeneas, she willed to meet her end. Let ignorance be still! I speak of her, Dido, whom honour led to death, and not an empty love, as is the public cry.’)

And in 4.5 of his Res seniles, in a letter ‘to Federigo Aretino, on certain creations of Virgil’, in the course of an allegorical explanation of Aeneid 4, Petrarch refers to the Pompeius Trogus/Justin version to remark that ‘except some of the multitude ... [no one] is so uneducated as not to know that the story of Aeneas and Dido is fictitious, and that it has gained the status of truth among men, eager not so much for truth as for beauty, through the loveliness of the subject and the poet’s sweetness and art’. 9


also retells Dido’s true story in *Africa* 3.524-37, and Sophonisba’s curse of Scipio in the following book echoes Dido’s curse of Aeneas.¹⁰

Dante, who had condemned Dido to the second circle of his *Inferno*, is criticized by more than one commentator, including Benvenuto da Imola,¹¹ who quotes the authority of Jerome; while Francesco da Buti, also a defender of Dido’s reputation, practically translates Jerome’s words, emphasizing that ‘Cartagine fu edificata da castissima donna, et in segno di ciò finie in grandissima castità’ (‘Carthage was built by a most chaste woman, and as a mark and proof of this, it ended in the greatest chastity’). Dido—Francesco da Buti insists—killed herself to keep her promise to Sychaeus, and also to spare her subjects the evils of war. She never met Aeneas, nor died for love of him: ‘e pero’ Virgilio fece molto male a dare tale infamia a si’ onesta donna, per fare bella sua poesia; e lo nostro Dante fece peggio a seguitarlo in questo’ (‘Therefore Virgil was quite wrong in injuring the reputation of such an honest woman in order to embellish his poetry; and our Dante was even more wrong in following his example’).¹²

On the contrary, a young Spanish soldier warring in South America spontaneously objects to the idea of a chaste Dido, resting on the authority of the *Aeneid*, where—he says—one can see how she¹³

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¹³ Alonso de Ercilla y Zuñiga *La Araucana* 32.44 (E. Lerner [ed.], Madrid, 1993).
‘del amor libidino encendida,
siguendo el torpe fin de su deseo
rompió la fe y promesa a su Sichco’

(‘inflamed with libidinous love, pursuing the satisfaction of her lewd desire, did break her promise to Sychaeus.’)

This comes from an episode of *La Araucana*, an extraordinary Spanish epic poem, where the young soldier is led to realize his (and Virgil’s) mistake, and Dido’s story is woven into the adventures of Spain’s aggressive colonisation. Author and narrator of the poem is Don Alonso de Ercilla y Zuñiga, a nobleman whose life—not uncommonly in those times—was divided between diplomacy, war, and poetry. In 1554 he was sent to Chile to take part in the fight against the rebellion of the fierce Araucan Indians. Though living a life of hardships, facing hunger and sometimes wounded in the field of battle, he still found the time and energy to begin composing his epic poem—not really autobiographical but certainly conveying a sense of immediacy, of being rooted in the reality of his everyday experiences. As Ercilla says in the prologue, the poem is written in the midst of the events it partially represents, the clashes of a war meant to firmly establish Spanish power in South America, beating down the resistance of the indigenous peoples—in this case the brave and proud race of the Araucans.

Influenced by the ideas of Padre Bartolomé de Las Casas, the poem is humanely sympathetic towards the *bárbaros*, and indeed full of admiration for their courageous struggle against an enemy as strong as the Spaniards: among the Araucans, the sons go to war before their time, anxious to revenge their fathers, and even the women take up arms in defense of their land.14 As the *conquistadores* are the instrument of a divine plan bringing Christianity to South America, the Araucans are doomed to defeat;

14 Cf Ercilla, *Araucana* (as in n.13), Prologue.
nevertheless they emerge as the true heroes of this narrative, which for this very reason attracted Voltaire’s admiration.15

In this clash of civilizations, Dido’s story—with its multiple echoes of fatal conflicts—is not out of place. She is first mentioned in 21.3 with other famous women as

‘la fenisa Dido
a quien Virgilio injustamente infama’

(‘Phoenician Dido, whom Virgil unjustly defamed’)

but the occasion for a full treatment of her adventures comes in Book 32 when the narrator, accompanied by a small group of soldiers, meets a young wounded woman. Lauca, daughter and heir of chief Millalaoco, is desperate at the death of her husband; not yet fifteen, she begs to be killed, because16

‘La vida así me cansa y aborrece,
viendo muerto a mi esposo y dulce amigo
que cada hora que vivo me parece
que cometí maldad, pues no le sigo.’

(‘Life so fatigues and disgusts me, having seen the death of my spouse and sweet friend, that each hour I live seems to me a crime because I have not yet followed him.’)

The comparison with casta Elisa Dido and her fidelity is then made—hence the objection of the young soldier.

15 Voltaire, Essai sur la poésie épique (Paris, 1776).
16 Ercilla, Araucana (as in n.13), 32.39.
Digressing from the main narrative, the rest of Book 32 and half of the next one (32.45-91; 33.1-54) are then devoted, first to a refutation of the Virgilian version, then to the truthful account, 'el cierto y verdadero cuento', of the queen's case. Ercilla explains how the Roman poet, wanting to please Augustus who vaunted his descent from Aeneas,

\[
'\text{con Dido usó de termino inhumano}
\]
\[
\text{infamándola injusta y falsamente'}
\]

('cruelly mistreated Dido, unjustly defaming her with a falsehood')

The chronological argument is mentioned:

\[
'\text{pues vemos por los tiempos haber sido}
\]
\[
\text{Eneas cien años antes que fue Dido'}
\]

('we know that Aeneas lived a hundred years before Dido')

and the offense to the queen's honour is deplored. The real story follows, along the lines of Justin's narration, which had been translated into Castillian by Jorge de Bustamante and published in 1540 by Juan Brocas. Much emphasis is put on Dido's political cunning, on her ability as leader of her people and founder of a great city; her several speeches are always full of dignity, and her last address to her 'fieles compañeros' explains her suicide as the best way to avoid damage to Carthage, ending\(^\text{17}\)

\[
'A \text{ Dios, a Dios, amigos, que ya os veo}
\]
\[
\text{libres y a mi marido satisfecho'}
\]

('Farewell, farewell, my friends—I can already see that you are freed and my husband satisfied')

\(^\text{17}\) Ercilla, \textit{Araucana} (as in n.13), 33.50.
Ercilla is not the only Spanish author to have opted for the chaste-and-strong version of Dido’s story; the factors which make his poem especially interesting are on the one hand the circumstances of its composition and the unusual treatment of its subject matter, and on the other the openly polemical nature of the choice, a refutation of Virgil while at the same time following in his literary steps—and the insistence on the superior value of historical truth, not to be betrayed for the sake of poetry. A vexata quaestio already introduced by Macrobius in his Saturnalia, and recurrently treated by commentators and retellers of the Dido episode—we have seen Boccaccio and Petrarch alluding to it respectively in Genealogia deorum gentilium and in the Res seniles—this is a topic which would require another paper, and can only be touched upon here with regard to our Spanish upholders of Dido’s honour.

Lope de Vega is one of them, and (often referring to Ausonius’s famous epigram) he underlines again and again in his copious literary production the falsity of the episode in the Aeneid—which he nevertheless uses. Thus in the prologue to the poem La Circe, he says that Ulysses ‘mayor desculpa tiene que la que puede dar la poesia al principe de los poetas latinos, haciendo a Elisa Dido tan dishonest, havindo sido muger tan casta, come reprehende Ausonio’ (‘can be excused by better reasons than those poetry can give to the prince of Latin poets, when he made Elisa Dido dishonest, she having been such a chaste woman, as Ausonius recalls’). But then in La Circe itself we find the Virgilian version of the story, and in Auto del viaje del alma, Dido is one of the sinners the devil lists as travelling on the ship of sexual pleasure; while sonnet 118 in Rimas—‘Yo soy la casta Dido celebrada’ (‘I am famous chaste Dido’)—sees Virgil paying for his lie in hell.18

Combining both versions in the sonnet prefaced to his tragicomedy *Las almenas de Toros*, Lope de Vega rhetorically plays upon the affirmation of the ‘true’ story to beg the queen to forgive that ‘insolent’ falsehood now that it has been clothed in the verses of Guillén de Castro, author of the Virgilian drama *Dido y Eneas*.¹⁹

Phoenician Dido, who travelled victorious in the Sidonian sea, and in her inviolate chastity kept her conjugal vows, is asked to forgive the lie against her reputation—not because Virgil sang her, but because Guillén now does, causing even Ausonius to remain silent.

In Lope’s homage to an admired friend and fellow-playwright, the defense of truth is qualified by the happier consequences of a well-told lie, bringing to mind the great baroque theatre of reality and appearance. This

opposition, which characterizes Spanish culture in the *Siglo de Oro*, takes here the form of a dialectic between beauty and fidelity, as is often the case with Lope de Vega; just think, right from the title, of his comedy *La hermosafea*.20

The same thesis, that thanks to Virgil’s falsehood Dido had gained a greater fame than ever her chastity could have given her, had been put forward in the first months of 1592 by a member of the Academia de los Humildes called El Balordo, who argued that ‘Dido llevará antes en paciencia ser bagassa de Eneas en las obras de Virgilio que muger de ben en *La Araucana*’ (‘Dido would rather patiently bear to be Aeneas’s mistress in Virgil’s works, than an honest woman in *La Araucana*’). And on 7 October of the same year, when the Academia de los Nocturnos met to exchange poems in favour of and against the queen’s chastity, a member called Temeridad read a *Soneto a la reina Dido furiosa por la ausencia de Eneas*: this was followed by the reply of Soledad, *Soneto defendiéndola, y a Virgilio*. In the many learned and poetical disputes on the truth of Dido’s story, the authority of the Latin poet was an inevitable point of reference, whether to reassert or to discount it, to praise or to condemn his falsa y fabulosa invention.21

Virgil would always be in the background, even when not explicitly mentioned, as is the case with *Elisa Dido*, a tragedy by Cristóbal de

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Virués. Carefully adhering to the Aristotelian unities, the action centers on Iarbas’s request to marry the queen, her pretense of accepting, and her suicide. The location is always the temple near Dido’s palace, and the structure is classical: five acts, each concluded by a chorus. Virués, however, does bring his own contribution to the story, creating four new characters: general Carquedonio (a name recalling the Greek name of Carthage, Karchedon) and governor Seleuco, both in love with the queen; and two ladies-in-waiting at Dido’s court, Delbora and Ismeria, in their turn smitten by love for the two men. This complication in the otherwise linear plot introduces the motif of court life, criticising its vain amorous intrigues, and reinforcing the main theme, i.e. el desengaño.

The moralizing lesson about the vanity of life and the ever-present possibility of disillusionment and a sudden reversal in one’s fortunes is openly stated by the Chorus; but it is also voiced by the characters—especially by the ladies-in-waiting, women who, in contrast to Dido, are suffering the pains of love. In Act Two, Ismeria sadly muses that all is an engaño (a lie, an illusion) in this mutable world; and she and Delbora will enlarge upon this reflection in Act Five, after their hopes of winning Carquedonio’s and Seleuco’s affections have been totally disappointed: false is love and false are its desires, fathers to sweet false reasonings, vain hopes of false pretenses, daughters of a sweet false raving; and all dreams of joy and pleasure end up in smoke, carried away by the wind—they end in desengaño.

Dido is above these sentimental preoccupations: she is queen/priestess/goddess, identified with her city, in a sublimation which the Epilogue confirms, when Iarbas declares her ‘goddess of Carthage, eternally entitled to veneration, honour, and devotion’, and vows to defend the city in her memory and in her name. In the background, not acted but recounted, are other political and amorous wars, indexes and metaphors of

an encompassing *desengaño*, while Dido’s initial acceptance of Iarbas’s offer and her request for time could be easily understood by an audience steeped in the diplomatic manoeuvres of Philip II’s court, just as her final suicide answers to the necessary prevailing of State reasons. Individual will must submit to a superior good, the destined course of events must take place; Dido—heroic queen and saintly widow—sacrifices herself to Sychaeus’s memory and to the safety of her city.

She dies as she has lived, this Dido virago, whose strength and courage are often underlined, as great and greater than a man’s; and her virtue takes on the qualities of a counter-reformist *exemplum*. It has rightly been remarked that her motivations (chastity, duty, peace) are part of a wider philosophical disposition, that of Christian asceticism, so that her story as virtuous founder and queen partakes of the controversial reflection on free will which engaged both Catholic and Protestant thinkers, and the theatrical *desengaño* becomes a political and religious *contemptus mundi*.23

The context of late sixteenth-century Spain is also relevant for the themes treated by Gabriel Lobo Lasso de la Vega, employed at court by Philip II and then by Philip III, to whom he dedicated his Didonian tragedy.24 The title of the 1587 edition is explicit and exhaustive: it is a tragedy of Dido’s honour restored, dealing with the loves of Iarbas, King of the Mauritans, Dido’s chaste behaviour, and the true facts of her death. There is here—*la honra de Dido restaurada*—an open polemical tone against Virgil, confirmed in the Epilogue where Fame, one of the characters in the play, solemnly declares the queen’s honesty, denouncing Virgil’s false


accusation that she betrayed Sychaeus’s memory. The play covers Dido’s story in full: we see her married to Sychaeus, then fleeing Tyre and the machinations of her brother after her husband’s death, stopping in Cyprus on the way to Africa, etcetera. The action moves from one location to another, in a dynamic treatment of events which reflects the tragedy’s ideological background. Already in the Argumento prefaced to the dramatic text, the author refers to the many previous travels and adventures of the Phoenician people, proposing a model whereby the breaking of a pre-existing order is followed by its re-establishment in a new-founded city. Similarly, a poet’s lie must be disclosed and refuted through poetry: tragedy, the genre which in late sixteenth-century Spain carried politically and socially moralizing implications, must accomplish the task of vindicating Dido, fabulosamente insulted by Virgil.

Co-protagonists of Lasso’s play are Pygmalion and especially Iarbas, the latter announced as such already in the title; a sub-plot involving the characters of Marcio and Anna runs parallel to and at times intersects the main story-line. Introduced in the primera jornada, Marcio is a Tyrian nobleman whom we see declaring his love to Dido’s sister Anna in the edenic setting of a peaceful beautiful garden; an amorous relationship analogically recalling that between Dido and Sychaeus which opens the play, while contrastingly looking forward to Iarbas’s love for Dido, the motor of the tragic action. Marcio will appear again in the tercera jornada, leading a platoon of two hundred soldiers ready to fight against Iarbas. Marking the establishment of Dido’s reign and the refoundation of Phoenician power, his double role—as a lover and as a soldier involved in a power struggle—is functional to the play’s themes.

Great importance is laid in the play on the foundation of Carthage, a new orderly reign after the disruptions of Pygmalion’s rule in Tyre. The political organization is modelled along the lines of the Spanish monarchy, with the sovereign—here Queen Dido—holding an absolute power and appointing all dignitaries. The laws of Tyre and Sidon are adopted, as though fully restoring them after a momentary lapse which could not
tarnish their intrinsic value: they are the laws of a hierarchical society familiar to a contemporary Spanish audience, who would share, or at least be invited to share, the conviction that a new state should recreate the pre-existing order. Dido is a figure of this cyclical vision of history, already propounded by the author in the Argumento; her purifying suicide, preceded by Marcio's death in battle, is a ritual sublimation promptly acknowledged for its cathartic value by Iarbas, and confirmed by Diana's final speech in praise of Dido.

Sixty years after Lasso's 'restoration', another playwright, Álvaro Cubillo de Aragon, engages in his own defense of the queen's honour, published in 1654 with some other of Cubillo's writings in a volume entitled El enano de las Musas ('The Dwarf of the Muses'). It is interesting to note that Cubillo, by this time fairly well known and successful in the literary and theatrical worlds both in Andalusia and in Madrid, included in the volume several poems, besides the ten plays which take up most of it. Among these poems is the long Las Cortes del león y del águila, a re-writing of his Curia Leónica, an allegorical depiction of the court composed in 1625, with the lion and lioness representing King Philip IV and Queen Mariana of Austria. Clearly, after almost thirty years, Cubillo still found it important to ensure the protection of the sovereign and his court.

Cubillo's La honestidad defendida de Elisa Dido resembles Virués's tragedy more than Lasso's: the action takes place only in Carthage, and the preceding events are recounted by Elisa in the first act; the insistence


26 Álvaro Cubillo de Aragon, La honestidad defendida de Elisa Dido, reyna y fundadora de Cartagine, in El enano de las musas. Comedia y obras diversas (Hildesheim, 1971).
on courtly intrigues is also reminiscent of Virués’s newly invented characters, but Cubillo is definitely exploiting to the full the possibilities of the *comedia palaciega*. While Elisa Dido firmly and polemically defends her honour, there go on around her a series of misunderstandings, secret meetings, disguisings, and unexpected twists, which paradoxically belittle her proclaimed virtue, emphasising its conventionality as well as the rhetorical nature of her protests. Iarbas is in Carthage as his own ambassador because he wants to make sure that the queen is as beautiful as her portrait; Anna takes Dido’s place for a nightly assignation with Iarbas in the gardens, revealing her deception only in the final *dénouement*; but the last scene is certainly the most grotesque. Dido shows to Iarbas the pyre prepared for her sacrifice, and goes towards it holding a sword and saying that she means to burn rather than marry, first thrusting the sword in her breast. At this point Iarbas renounces his pretenses, but Dido—reverting to Paul’s dictum—declares that after all she had rather marry than burn; the king, however, is firm in his decision not to renew his offer, although he vows to honour her with his courtship as long as he lives. Dido agrees, at the same time insisting that the pyre and the sword—the possibility of a redeeming suicide—still bear witness to her honesty against the lies of certain writings.

The main culprit, Virgil, actually appears on stage, presented in Act One as a vision evoked by an Athenian philosopher who is taking part in the festivities for Carthage’s foundation. The philosopher reads ill omens in the stars for the city and its founder, predicting that a *fabuloso* author will compose a great poem defaming the queen: a curtain is drawn, and—voilà, nothing is impossible in the magic world of the theatre—Virgil is disclosed, busy at his *Aeneid*. The philosopher goes on to explain that the poet has made Aeneas Dido’s contemporary, and has made the two of them fall in love, then to depict the queen as abandoned and in despair. Dido angrily resents the slight to her reputation, and first of all the anachronism—Virgil must be punished, and luckily the archives hold the proofs of the true course of events. So it will be possible for
another author to put the liar to shame, a prophecy which is coming true in the very moment Cubillo attributes it to the enraged queen.

The preference for the non-Virgilian story is especially marked in Spanish literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though, as we have seen with Lope de Vega, the use of both versions in different works was by no means unusual. Virués chooses the faithful and strong Dido in his play, but is also the author of a *Soneto a Eneas, dexando a Dido abandonada*, while Guillén de Castro, whose verses had once again glorified the beauty of the abandoned queen provoking Lope's admiration, mentions the 'insult' to her honour in his comedy *Quien malas mañas ha, tarde o nunca las perderá* ('The man who has evil hands shall lose them late, or not at all'), where Galalón, who has been slandering the infanta doña Sevilla, is compared to 'el maldiziente Virgilio', and she to 'la reyna Dido infamada'.27 Both stories were also present in the medieval *Crónica general*, compiled at the order of Alfonso X the Wise: Justin's version in chapters 51 to 56, Virgil's in chapters 57 to 60.

Although especially honoured in Spain, chaste Dido is not totally absent in other European literatures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In England, George Turberville berates Virgil’s lie in his sonnet ‘Of Dido and the Truth of Hir Death’ (1567); and in the play *Patient Grissill*, by Chettle, Haughton, and Dekker, the misogynist allegation about women’s inconstancy is countered by the example of the Carthaginian widow. In France, François Le Metel de Boisrobert had Virués and Lasso de la Vega as models for his tragedy *La vraye Didon ou la Didon chaste* (1641).28

27 Guillén de Castro y Bellvis, *Quien malas mañas ha, tarde o nunca las perderá*, in E. Julià Martínez (ed.), *Obras* (as in n.19).

Dido’s theatrical tradition is not particularly interesting in Germany, where more than anywhere else the theatre would long remain a highly elitist activity. The late sixteenth-century tragedies in Latin by Knaust, Frischlin, Hospein—being little more than a learned dramatisation of Virgil’s version—are not an original contribution to the ample canon of dramatic texts devoted to our queen.29 Quite different is the case of a much later Trauerspiel by Charlotte von Stein, composed in the lively cultural environment of the Weimar court under the rule of Duchess Anna Amalia and later of her son Carl August.30 Well known for having inspired Goethe’s love, as well as some of his greatest female characters (Iphigenia in Iphigenie auf Tauris, Eleonora in Tasso, Nathalie in Wilhelm Meister), von Stein deserves greater attention as an author than she has been granted this far. What she certainly does not deserve is the accusation of incompetence aimed at her by scholars who censure her decision not to mention Aeneas.31 It is more than likely that in planning her Dido, which she began composing in 1794, von Stein consulted Benjamin Hederich’s Gründliches Mythologisches Lexicon, a mythological repertory published in 1770 and very popular among writers of the period (Goethe himself is known to have used it). Hederich quoted all available sources on Dido, pointed out the incompatibility of Virgil’s account with the older ones, and outlined a possible ‘historical’ version. Von Stein’s choice was indeed a choice, not an unfortunate mistake—and the variations she introduced must also be assumed to be a conscious re-signification of the story.


29 For more information on Dido in German literature, cf Eberhard Semrau, Dido in der deutschen Dichtung (Berlin and Leipzig, 1930).


31 Cf Semrau, Dido (as in n.29), 64.
The tragedy begins with Dido resisting Iarbas's marriage proposal, and ends with her suicide; an important part is played by three Carthaginian intellectuals—a poet, a philosopher and a historian—who are the queen's advisers, sent by her as her ambassadors to the African kings, whose interests they then support against her. Anna’s place is taken by a faithful friend named Elissa, and the solidarity between the two women is repeatedly emphasised, reinforcing the contrast between Dido’s loyalty and the courtiers’ treachery. When the queen’s amorous relationship with one of them—Ogon, the poet—breaks up because of that betrayal, a corresponding strengthening of Elissa’s role as friend and supporter takes place.

To escape Iarbas’s savage passion, also sparing Carthage the consequences of his fury, Dido abdicates in favour of her brother and retires to a solitary place known only to her advisers, to the high priest Albicerio and to her trusted Elissa. In Act Four Carthage is in turmoil, Iarbas threatening to attack it. He insistently asks Elissa and Albicerio to disclose Dido’s secret hiding place: the priest counters Iarbas’s threat to kill him with a vow to sacrifice himself in the temple, while Elissa is regal and dignified in her refusal to betray the queen. Unexpectedly, Dido herself arrives to parley with Iarbas: she rebukes the deceitful advisers, asks for a pyre to be built in order to offer the gods an ox—and kills herself on it.

The topicality of the play is not difficult to notice, both with reference to the Weimar literary and political scene and to von Stein’s personal situation. The editor of the 1867 edition of Dido, never published before, painstakingly consulted Goethe’s letters searching for identifications—Iarbas/Carl August; Ogon/Goethe etcetera—privileging a reading of von Stein’s tragedy all centered on its relation and significance to Goethe’s life. Considering the central importance of Goethe in the Weimar of that period, where his Iphigenie auf Tauris was acknowledged as the first manifestation of a new German classicism, it would be unrealistic to presume that von Stein could ignore the significance attributed to myth
in that drama. *Dido* reproposes a sacrificial figure, a woman endangered by the barbarous alien; but unlike Iphigenia, von Stein's widowed queen is not a sublimated symbolic figure, an 'enlightened' redeemer set against the dark forces of evil. She has full agency in the story, and her suicide is a radical political act given a special added significance by the fact that she is a woman. Iarbas, the barbarian whose only aim is to satisfy his lascivious desires, corrupts the Carthaginian men—the advisers Dido banishes from her realm. As it has been perceptively remarked:32

‘Poetry, philosophy and history have conspired as masculine discourses against the woman ruler, who has been struggling to maintain a virtuous republic. They have subordinated themselves to the interest of masculine desire, which proclaimed, in the figure of Jarbas, to seek Enlightenment but really wanted power and especially power over women. From the woman’s viewpoint, these men are no longer useful for good government and have no legitimate place in the hierarchy of authority.’

The distinction between authority and power has been central to the reflection of Italian feminism,33 and it is indeed interesting to find it mentioned in a man’s scholarly treatment of von Stein’s tragedy; undoubtedly, her *Dido* succeeds in questioning the relations between men and women, posing the problem of a much needed change.

Her depiction of Dido as a strong, positive character stands out all the more if we think that in the eighteenth century the prevailing image of our queen was not only modelled on Virgil, but rendered more sentimental and passive—Metastasio’s *Didone abbandonata* being the greatest example. After that, though with recurring exceptions, Dido’s figure does not claim a major place among those which, taken from ancient mythology and


classical literature, keep being revisited, yielding old and new meanings in changing contexts. But the themes variously set out in the two versions of her story have not lost their relevance: the fascinations and dangers of female sexuality; the dichotomy between public and private, personal and political; the bliss and pain of love; women’s capacity or incapacity to rule. Though at the moment they are differently recounted and embodied, they are still with us, and probably will be for quite a while. Hopefully, not for ever. In the meantime, Dido’s stories can still teach us some lessons; and we will always be wanting to enjoy (to use Petrarch’s words) ‘the ... sweetness and art’ poured out to re-tell them in a variety of expressive means.

Paola Bono and M. Vittoria Tessitore
Università di Roma Tre