

CAENEUS AND DIDO

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In memoriam: Robert B. Palmer

Vergil's unusual inclusion of the man-woman Caeneus among Dido's female companions in the underworld, each of whom recalls at least one aspect of her life, encourages us to reconsider Dido's story from the perspective of sexual transformation. However, the relationship between Caeneus' sexual transformations and the chief events of Dido's life is more complex than previous scholars have noticed.¹ Caeneus' ambiguous gender in death—though female in shape, “she” has a masculine name—corresponds to a tragic conflict in Dido's soul, evident during her life and emblematically reasserted in her last words at death and in her condition as a shade in the underworld.

Aeneas' final and painful parting with Dido occurs not, as we would expect, among the suicides, but in a place called the grieving fields (*lugentes campi*). The nature of this place and of the people in it will be important for our understanding of Dido's present and now eternal state:

¹ A slightly different version of this paper was presented at the 1979 APA annual meeting.

E. Kraggerud, “Caeneus und der Heroinenkatalog, *Aeneis* VI 440ff.,” *SO* 40 (1965) 66–71, and J. Perret, “Les compagnes de Didon aux Enfers (*Aen.* VI, 445–449),” *REL* 42 (1964) 247–61; R. G. Austin's commentary, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos liber sextus* (Oxford 1977), adds little to their discoveries. K. Büchner, *RE* 2, 8, 1387 (= *P. Vergilius Maro, Der Dichter der Römer* [Stuttgart 1955] 365), points out that the purpose of the catalogue is to prepare the way for the meeting with Dido; see also Conington-Nettleship, *P. Vergili Maronis Opera, The Works of Virgil* (London 1883⁴) vol. 2 on 6.445. B. Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford 1964) 293, note 2, remarks that the point of the “mythological Hades” is to introduce the three scenes with Palinurus, Dido, and Deiphobus. R. D. Williams in *The Aeneid of Virgil, Books 1–6* (London 1972) on 6.445 f. sees only a negative relationship between the heroines and Dido: “This crowd scene of seven heroines irrelevant to the action of the *Aeneid* serves to focus the attention very sharply on the one who is not irrelevant—*inter quas Phoenissa . . .*”

hic quos durus amor crudeli tabe peredit
 secreti celant calles et myrtea circum
 silva tegit; curae non ipsa in morte relinquunt.²

Dido's presence here indicates that she too died for love, for love of Aeneas. Nevertheless, she refuses to speak to him and flees away to rejoin her old husband Sychaeus, who "responds to her cares and equals her love" (*respondet curis aequatque Sychaeus amorem*, 6.474).

Seven heroines made famous by Greek tradition accompany Dido. For most of these heroines Vergil tells us only their names and thereby creates the effect of a catalogue reminiscent of the much longer heroine-catalogue of *Odyssey* 11.225–329. E. Kraggerud and J. Perret have argued that when Vergil mentions the heroines' names, he invites us to recall the story associated with each woman and to see the connections between their experiences and Vergil's portrayal of Dido's tale of passionate love and death (see above, note 1).

Durus amor is the important unifying element among the stories of all the heroines except that of Caeneus, the last companion to be named before Dido appears and the only one to receive more than perfunctory description.³ Rather surprisingly, this description concerns sexual transformation and has nothing to do with the *topos* of dying for love:

... iuuenis quondam, nunc femina, Caeneus
 rursus et⁴ in veterem fato reuoluta figuram. (6.448–49)

According to the surviving tradition, Caeneus the Lapith is originally a girl, Caenis (cf. *kainos*). In return for her favors Poseidon makes her invulnerable and transforms her into a man, the warrior Caeneus who takes part in the battle with the Centaurs and is also celebrated in other heroic exploits.⁵ No known tradition contains mention of a

² *Aeneid* 6.442–44; all quotations of the *Aeneid* are from the OCT edition of R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford 1972).

³ However, *durus amor* may not entirely account for the presence of Eriphyle, another heroine described even more briefly than Caeneus; see my paper, "The Significance of Vergil's Eriphyle," *Vergilius* forthcoming.

⁴ I am indebted to my colleague David R. Sweet for the observation that the *et* of 449 probably connects *rursus* and *reuoluta*, and raises the possibility of reading the original force of the masculine *reversus* in the adverb *rursus*. While the *-us* of *rursus* does not denote the masculine gender, it does perhaps evoke it, thus adding to the confusion of genders; Caeneus is "reversed" (*rursus*, masculine) at the beginning of the line, "returned" (feminine, *reuoluta*) by the end of it.

⁵ See the comments of Servius (Thilo-Hagen) on 6.448 (Leipzig and Berlin 1923) vol. 2, and the references in W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon für griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig 1884–1890) "Kaineus" (Seeliger). Seeliger suggests that

death for love. Vergil's emphasis on transformation invites us to consider whether Caeneus' sexual changes have anything to do with Dido, particularly since the last change, the reversion of the man to woman, exists in no other source and may therefore be Vergil's own invention.⁶

Kraggerud and Perret agree that these transformations are important but disagree about their significance. For Kraggerud change as such is the important thing. Caeneus' transformations recall Dido's relationships with men: she is first with Sychaeus, then with Aeneas, then with Sychaeus again in the underworld.⁷ This observation is helpful, as far as it goes, for it calls attention correctly to a further function of the catalogue as a whole. The heroines mentioned earlier remind us that Dido died for love. Caeneus' last transformation emphasizes Dido's present and final condition: her accomplished return to Sychaeus in death. However, Perret's explanation, which emphasizes change of sex, is more attractive. As a young girl Dido is married to Sychaeus, but upon his death she becomes a *regina* with full responsibility for her city. "C'est un destin héroïque," says Perret, and, because it is a heroic calling consistent with the emphasis of the entire *Aeneid* upon the ultimate heroism of political founding, that destiny is properly masculine. The final change of Caeneus from man back to woman is reflected in Dido's return through death to the husband of her youth.⁸ She is no longer political and masculine but wifely and hence feminine.

It is true that Dido loses her husband, becomes a *dux femina*, falls in love with Aeneas, and returns to Sychaeus. But if these experiences are viewed as transformations which correspond to those of Caeneus, it appears that Dido suffers one transformation too many. In fact, neither Kraggerud nor Perret goes far enough in explaining

the sexual changes are part of an earlier tradition; however, the tradition that Caeneus was pounded into the ground by the Centaurs (the only way they could kill him because of his invulnerability) seems to have been more popular. Lejay's attempt to explain Caeneus' presence in *Aeneid* 6 by "the love of Poseidon" is unconvincing; see F. Plessis and P. Lejay, *Oeuvres de Virgile* (Paris 1931²) on 6.448.

⁶ E. Norden, *P. Vergilius Maro Aeneis Buch VI* (Darmstadt 1970, repr. of Leipzig 1916⁵) on 445 ff.: "Es macht den Eindruck, als ob das [Caeneus' second change] seine eigene Erfindung ist, zu der er sich um so mehr berechtigt halten durfte, als die Sage von Caenis-Caeneus überhaupt schwankte . . ." However, he seems to have no notion why Vergil would have created the second transformation.

⁷ Kraggerud (above, note 1) 69.

⁸ Perret (above, note 1) 252 bases his argument for masculinity on Dido's last statement of her achievements (4.653–56) which I find questionable (see p. 322 below), but there is no doubt that we should consider the founding of Carthage a heroic masculine deed in view of Vergil's presentation of Aeneas as founder of Rome.

the essence of Dido's story as reflected here in Caeneus' transformations, nor do they correctly explain Caeneus' own experience, which is more complicated.

Vergil could have called this heroine *Caenis*, using the feminine form. Instead, as manuscript evidence attests,⁹ he wrote *Caeneus*, creating this inharmonious juxtaposition: . . . *femina Caeneus . . . reuoluta*.¹⁰ The jarring grammar calls into question the smooth transition from man back to woman which both Kraggerud and Perret assume. Caeneus' shade has a woman's shape (*figuram*), but retains the name of a man. The shape collides with the name that Vergil has allotted his Caeneus, the two forming an unstable compound; Caeneus is neither completely male nor completely female.¹¹ If we view Dido's story under the aspect of her changing sexual roles, we discover that the ambiguity of Caeneus' gender points to an ambiguity in Dido's soul, an ambivalence dramatized in her life and commemorated now in the underworld. She does embrace a heroic destiny, but she also finds that she desires a man's love. Dido is at once Aeneas' lover and the ruler of Carthage: her desires for love and her heroic ambition bind her to two conflicting ways of life. In the underworld her conduct toward Aeneas and her relationship with Sychaeus confirm that even in death this tension continues unresolved.

When Dido becomes a *dux femina*, she takes on, as Perret notes, a distinctly masculine task. The unfortunate murder of Sychaeus compels her to give up her wifely, feminine life; she flees Tyre and endures exile. But now a new dimension of her nature emerges. No longer the naive girl who languishes over Sychaeus' disappearance (1.351–52), Dido becomes in her own right a *regina* who founds and governs a city. When Aeneas first sees her, she is engaged in political actions more usual for a man than a woman. Dido is confident and

⁹ All the manuscripts have *Caeneus*, although Heinsius had emended to *Caenis*. Wagner restored *Caeneus* on the assumption that the implied word order is actually *Caeneus iuuenis quondam, nunc femina reuoluta*; see Conington-Nettleship (above, note 1) on 6.448.

¹⁰ The position of *Caeneus* makes it unavoidably the antecedent of *reuoluta*. Norden (above, note 6) seems to try to explain away the clash of genders by referring to Catullus' Attis poem (63); see also Conington-Nettleship (above, note 1) and F. Fletcher, *Virgil, Aeneid VI* (Oxford 1941). It should be obvious that the strange grammar is introduced to call emphatic attention to Caeneus' grotesque experience; see Kraggerud (above, note 1) 68.

¹¹ It is particularly bizarre that Caeneus' retransformation is literally *pro forma*. Having no longer any body to be male or female, Caeneus is left with a female "outline" (cf. *obscuram* of Dido, compared to the new moon seen dimly through clouds, 6.453–54) of her physical form and that other non-physical entity, the male name.

assured in her work. She is *laeta* in both senses of the word—joyful and productive—as she sits in Juno’s temple giving laws and assigning tasks.¹² Her suffering has made her generous and humane; this nobility renders her worthy of her exalted position as queen, and, we notice, it elicits Aeneas’ spontaneous admiration.¹³ However, her vow never to remarry, of which we learn later, creates in retrospect the image of a woman forced to deny her womanliness, of a woman transformed by the political station she has assumed.¹⁴

Dido is also transformed when she falls in love with Aeneas. However, our understanding of her movement from Sychaeus to Aeneas is complicated by the life she had led as *dux femina*. Dido’s “living love” for Aeneas revives a longing for the abandoned feminine way of life: she wants a husband and children.¹⁵ These desires,

¹² talis [qualis Diana] erat Dido, talem se laeta ferebat
per medios instans operi regnisque futuris.
tum foribus diuae, media testudine templi,
saepta armis solioque alte subnixa resedit.
iura dabat legesque uiris, operumque laborem
partibus aequabat iustis aut sorte trahebat. (1.503–08)

In the *Georgics* Vergil associates *laetus* with the generative, fertile nature of fields; here he applies it to Dido, perhaps with intentional irony, to indicate her happiness and productivity not as a woman but as a ruler performing the labors of a man.

¹³ *non ignara mali miseris succurrere disco* (1.630). For Aeneas’ extravagant words, 1.597–610. Dido possesses the same noble qualities as Aeneas himself and has experienced the same calamities. It is precisely because of their likeness in leadership, nobility of soul, and experience of suffering that she finds herself attracted to him (4.11–14). See V. Pöschl, *The Art of Vergil: Image and Symbol in the Aeneid* (Ann Arbor 1962) trans. G. Seligson, the section on Dido, especially 72 ff. and 138. This is still by far the best study of Dido, although many others have advanced similar interpretations, e.g., Otis (above, note 1) 67, “. . . [Aeneas] is, in effect, her *alter ego*.” The comments throughout this paper on Vergil’s treatment of Dido in *Aeneid* 1 and 4 depend largely on Pöschl’s discoveries in this book and in “Dido und Aeneas,” *Festschrift Vretska* (Heidelberg 1970) 148–73.

¹⁴ This image may be subtly anticipated by the simile of 1.498–502 in which Dido on her way to her daily tasks of government is likened to Diana at work training (i. e., governing) her chorus. Though a female divinity, Diana is an eternal virgin whose way of life is at odds with the traditional pursuits of adult women (cf. the Diana-like vignette of Dido dressed for the hunt, 4.136–39). One might object that Diana is after all a “Schützerin des weiblichen Lebens,” particularly with regard to children and childbirth; see K. Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (Munich 1960) 170 (referring to the Diana of Aricia). However, one suspects that this guardianship grows out of her protection of all young creatures. She herself paradoxically has no children.

¹⁵ Although Dido’s initial attraction to Cupid/Ascanius is divinely inspired, her affection for the human child continues, inextricably bound with her love for his father (4.84–85); her pathetic words about *paruulus Aeneas* (4.327–30) reveal her longing for a child of her own.

of course, might have arisen from practical political calculations. When Anna tries to convince Dido of the rightness of her love, she points out that Aeneas could provide Carthage with an heir and with security against its enemies (4.31–49). These are matters any responsible leader ought to consider. But Anna's political defense of Dido's love is made to appear after the fact and slightly disingenuous. Vergil emphatically presents Dido's attitudes and actions, her desires for marriage and a family, as feminine qualities, by their nature opposed to her masculine role as ruler. Absorbed in her fond passion for Aeneas, she neglects her city (4.86–89). The picture of Dido happily ruling in Juno's temple is replaced by that of Aeneas directing the work of the city, wearing a robe which Dido has carefully woven for him (4.260–64). The robe is a symbol of Dido's abandonment of her reign. Aeneas has become the ruler of Carthage; Dido has, at least by her own lights, married him and has confined herself to domesticity.

Vergil causes us to feel Dido's vulnerability by revealing the extent of her *de facto* abdication at the very moment when Mercury arrives to send Aeneas away. By surrendering herself entirely to Aeneas' protection, she deprives herself of the strength she needs to bear his loss. Harsh circumstance now shatters the condition for the womanly role she has so ardently embraced. Aeneas' sojourn has revived Dido's longing to lead a private life as wife and mother, but the man who has become indispensable for her happiness as a woman must depart.

At his leave-taking Aeneas appeals to Dido's achievements and responsibilities at Carthage in an effort to explain his own position. But he is, in effect, appealing to the masculine role which Dido has already rejected. She has just implied that she is incapable of protecting Carthage or herself and so cannot rule:

quid moror? an mea Pygmalion dum moenia frater
destruat aut captam ducat Gaetulus Iarbus? (4.325–26)

Aeneas still attempts to maintain that she should feel bound by love of the new city she has founded:

hic amor haec patria est. si te Karthagines arces
 Phoenissam Libyaeque aspectus detinet urbis,
 quae tandem Ausonia Teucros considerare terra
 invidia est? (4.347–50)

Pöschl discerns in the opposing stances from which the two talk past each other a tragic and "... essential difference between man and woman. . . . Dido is no longer queen; only a woman in love . . ." ¹⁶ The wreckage of Dido's would-be marriage reveals the inharmonious tension of her androgynous state. That part of her nature which affirms the political, masculine role with its concomitant celibacy is unalterably but uncomfortably mated to a part of her which denies the role and its disagreeable obligations. Now, having rejected the burden of her station, she feels acutely the masculine responsibilities she has neglected. Her duties to her city come again to mind as her lover recedes. For a time Dido still clings to remnants of her feminine dreams, wishing that she might have borne Aeneas' child if she cannot have the man (4.328 ff.), pleading pathetically for him to remain a little longer if he cannot stay forever (4.431 ff.). The failure of these hopes brings on the hallucinations and nightmares of madness (450–73). Yet she already feels that she cannot return to her heroic role as ruler, and the pathos of this recognition is augmented by the irony that she cannot reassume the masculine role precisely because in losing her chastity she has relinquished a woman's claim to honor and hence the basis of a claim to authority:

. . . te propter eundem
 extinctus pudor et, qua sola sidera adibam,
 fama prior . . . ¹⁷ (4.321–23)

¹⁶ Pöschl (above, note 13) "Dido und Aeneas," 158, "Während Aeneas sich aufgeben muss, hat Dido ihr wahres Selbst in der Liebe gefunden: hier ist ein anderer Urgegensatz zwischen Mann und Frau Gestalt geworden." See also 157: "Aeneas hat nicht begriffen, dass Dido nicht mehr Königin, sondern nur noch liebende Frau ist und dass sein Hinweis auf ihre Bindung an Karthago ungehört verhallen muss."

¹⁷ *Pudor*, "shame" (not necessarily "chastity," which is, more specifically, *pudicitia*), is not generally viewed as an explicitly feminine virtue; cf., e. g., Cicero *Cat.* 2.11.25. However, Dido's emotional references to *pudor* here and at the beginning of *Aeneid* 4 (25–29) mark the word as particularly associated in her mind with her vows of sexual fidelity to Sychaeus. Its "extinction" means the loss of her reputation for chastity and hence of her authority to rule. We notice that Aeneas is not distressed by the loss of his own *pudor*, perhaps because he in fact does not consider himself to have lost it. See 4.55 *solvit . . . pudorem* and the comments of A. S. Pease, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos liber quartus* (Cambridge, Mass. 1935) on 27 and 322. I am indebted to Professor Agnes Michels for the suggestion that Vergil's use of *pudor* rather than *pudicitia* to describe Dido's chastity is significant, and I hope to pursue it more closely in a subse-

She desires to regain her lost *pudor* and to escape the *curae* of her love for Aeneas.¹⁸ Without oversimplifying the complicated passions which lead Dido to suicide, we can nonetheless discern in her determination to die an effort to resolve the discord created by the two ways of life she has embraced. Since she cannot marry Aeneas, she will “remarry” Sychaeus. The wish to be true to her feminine nature clashes with the masculine duties which require her to live and rule. Under the stress of these conflicting impulses, she decides to die.

At her death she displays the male heroic attitude at its finest. After what we initially believe will be the last expression of womanly love, the commending of her soul to the *dulces exuviae* of Aeneas’ possessions (4.651–52), she cries:

vixi et quem dederat cursum fortuna peregi,
et nunc magna mei sub terras ibit imago.
urbem praeclaram statui, mea moenia vidi,
ultra uirum poenas inimico a fratre recepi . . . (4.653–56)

We spontaneously praise these words for their heroic and manly qualities.¹⁹ And yet Dido is not a man; the words immediately following (*felix, heu nimium felix* . . .) reveal the weakness of her stance. This ring-composition of her final speech betrays the conflict in her state of mind. The beginning and end of the speech affirm that she is a woman dying for love; the rehearsal of heroic achievements asserts her manliness.

Even the list of heroic deeds may be questioned, for it is difficult to see how she avenged Sychaeus on Pygmalion. She deprived her brother of the gold he loved (1.362–64)—which is a revenge of sorts—but she implies that she destroyed him, rather as Aeneas will destroy Turnus in revenge for Pallas, or as Augustus avenges Caesar’s murder. Through her boast Dido lays claim to a degree of

quent study.

¹⁸ See below, pp. 323–24. *Cura* is an inherently ambiguous word whose possibilities Vergil thoroughly exploits in his presentation of Dido: care, and hence the love one person feels for another, but also care in the sense of pain or anxiety. Guilt for her betrayed promises to Sychaeus, love (and later, love-hate) for Aeneas are all implied in the pain of Dido’s *curae*: *at regina gravi iamdudum saucia cura* (4.1); *non licuit thalami expertem sine crimine vitam / degere more ferae, talis nec tangere curas* (4.550–51); *accipite hanc animam meque his exsoluite curis* (4.652).

¹⁹ See particularly Pöschl (above, note 13) *Art of Vergil* 86 and 88.

heroism which she has never actually achieved;²⁰ now to her masculine role as founder of a city she belatedly adds a heroic revenge. The "great image" is formally complete, but dubious in its lack of verifiable substance.

Vergil's presentation of Caeneus leads us to two observations about Caeneus' transformations. The first change from woman to man is unnatural: people do not usually change genders. The second change from man to woman is incomplete, for the male name, *Caeneus*, remains. Through Caeneus' proximity to Dido in the catalogue Vergil suggests that Dido's masculine role has been ultimately unnatural too, that is, has been undertaken against the grain of her nature as a woman. The speed with which Dido throws herself into the "marriage" with Aeneas and her inability thereafter to resume her masculine duties confirm the hint provided by the parallelism of Caeneus. Yet, as various readers have noticed, Vergil's portrayal of Dido's love for Aeneas as festering wound, error, poison, and flame gives us the impression that this love is wrong from the beginning. Hence, the presence of Caeneus among Dido's underworld companions is another striking reminder of the oblique character of the queen's love for Aeneas, yet with a further irony: what should have been a natural and ordinary occurrence, a woman falling in love with a man, becomes something strange (one of the meanings of the word *kainos*), unusual and bizarre like the grammatical grotesquery of *femina Caeneus . . . reuoluta*.

Finally, just as Vergil's description of Caeneus' state in death combines male and female elements, Dido too is androgynous in death, but tragically so. Vergil displays her manly qualities by modeling her expression of implacable disdain for Aeneas upon the Homeric episode of Ajax' rebuff of Odysseus (*Od.* 11.563–65). Dido is thus set in an ungainly parallel with the Homeric male hero *par excellence*: her conduct is not patterned on the heroines of the Odyssean underworld nor any other female literary prototype. Even in death, then, Dido's male heroic "image" receives emphasis; though destroyed by *durus amor* (6.442), she is nonetheless like *dura silex* in her scorn (470). At the same time, however, Vergil stresses Dido's feminine nature. She is again with Sychaeus, and the *curae* to which he "responds" (474) are surely meant to evoke the *curae* which Vergil says each person in the grieving fields had in life and retains in death, just as they retain their death wounds. For Dido these *curae*

²⁰ Compare her earlier claim of vulnerability at 4.325–26 where she says that Aeneas' departure will result in Pygmalion's destruction of Carthage. There he is ready to swoop down upon her; here he has already been vanquished long ago.

include her unhappy love for Aeneas.²¹ Her flight to Sychaeus has restored “equal love” between them, but Sychaeus cannot dispel her *curae*, only console them. Dido is the same as a shade in death as she was at the moment of death. Womanly love as well as delusions of heroic grandeur continue to coexist in her soul, rather as Caeneus is female in shape, masculine in name.

Perhaps the most important result which a comparison of Caeneus’ transformations with Dido’s life brings to sight is Dido’s own view of herself. Although we see that she has the necessary talent and inclination to succeed in both ways of life, Dido acts as if she can fulfill only one role at a time. If she is to be a good wife, she cannot also be a good ruler; she has based her rule on chastity, a quality which paradoxically requires her to reject marriage and children. Ultimately she does not succeed as a man: her Medea-like curse on Aeneas also dooms Carthage and is her only departing “blessing” as its ruler (4.622–29). Nor has her womanly role borne fruit: she has no child; she has returned to Sychaeus but even in death has not escaped her love for Aeneas. The result is a tragic and eternal disharmony for the great queen who mourns in the grieving fields.

²¹ See note 18. Otis (above, note 1) 295 implies that Dido hates Aeneas and that is that; K. Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid: A Critical Description* (London 1968) 170, shows more understanding. G. S. Duclos, “Dido as Triformis Diana,” *Vergilius* 15 (1969) 37, believes Dido is indifferent to Aeneas.