

National Identity and *Heroides* 7: Narrative Interrupted

Nancy Shumate has recently argued that Horace's Roman Odes contribute to the Augustan message of national unity through their emphasis on virtues prevalent in the rhetoric of nationalism, as identified for later periods (2005). Drawing from a study of Virgil's *Aeneid* by Katherine Toll that reads the epic as contributing to the "enterprise of making Roman-ness" (1997: 34) Shumate emphasizes the role of writers in perpetuating narratives of national identity (2005: 84), as does Toll herself. Using these studies as its point of departure, this paper examines how Ovid's representation of Dido in *Heroides* 7, unlike Shumate's assessment of the Roman Odes and Toll's of the *Aeneid*, runs counter to the Augustan narrative of national origins as embodied by Virgil's epic. By doing so, I argue, Ovid's poem calls into question the legitimacy of that foundation story and thus may also critique Rome's imperialist agenda under the Augustan regime.

The instances of Dido's "correction" of the *Aeneid*, and especially of Aeneas' telling of the fall of Troy are many and well explored (Jacobson 1974, Desmond 1993, Miller 2004), but largely in terms of Ovid's intertextual references rather than what they might mean in Ovid's own context. This close reading of Ovid's *Heroides* 7 shows how this presentation of Dido's perspective is more than literary gamesmanship, but in fact questions Aeneas' mission to found Rome as presented in the *Aeneid*. From the start of the letter, Dido's emphasis on the certainty of Aeneas' departure (*certus es ire, 7; certus es... Itala regna sequi, 9-10*) despite his clear ignorance of where he is headed presents the hero as both headstrong and ignorant. At the same time she alludes to his uncertainty in the *Aeneid* and indeed his lack of focus on the task at hand that requires divine intervention in book 4 of the *Aeneid* to keep on track. Dido's presentation of Aeneas' goal, the *Itala regna* (10), is similarly problematic, as she questions his right to

possession of these new territories (15-6), thus undermining the legitimacy of his project as the forefather of Rome. Her scornful dismissal of Aeneas' claim that his mission is divinely authorized ('*sed iubet ire deus*', 139) further questions the story that Virgil's narrative proposes.

In addition to such general responses to Virgil, Ovid's Dido targets specific episodes in the *Aeneid* for correction. Her explanation of how the weather should influence his decision to depart at lines 41 forward builds on their final confrontation in the *Aeneid*, focusing on the hero's stubbornness and turning on its head Virgil's famous simile of Aeneas as an oak tree (52). This consistent refashioning of a positive depiction in Virgil into a negative one, using the very same subject matter, points our attention to how starkly Dido's view of Aeneas' mission diverges from the image Virgil paints in Rome's foundation narrative. Ovid's assertion, too, that it is Phrygian deceit (67-8) that has undone Dido assimilates and redeploys the notion of faithless Carthaginians, here removing the burden of the charge from Dido as the representative of Carthage to Aeneas the representative of Rome's future.

Dido's insistence on her role as Aeneas' legitimate wife (31-2, 97-97a, 107-8, 167-8) places a further obstacle to the *Aeneid*'s tale of direct progression from the shores of Troy to those of Italy, an obstacle neatly dismissed by Virgil in his famous assessment of Dido's view of their tryst in the cave (4.173): it was not marriage (*coniugium*), but fault (*culpam*). Ovid's seventh *Heroides* letter, as this paper intends to show, is itself an obstacle to the narrative of Rome's foundation as told by Virgil. In it, Ovid elaborates on ambiguities present in Virgil's text from the overtly foreign perspective of Dido, serving as a questioning voice for the *imperium sine fine* the *Aeneid* insists has been granted by Jupiter (1.279) and that is being administered by Aeneas' descendant Augustus.

Works Cited:

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