

## Reinscribing Dido: Ovid's Epigraphic Innovations

Ovid's literary epitaphs for Dido (*Fast.* 3.549–50 and *Her.* 7.195–96) reflect not only Dido's desire to control how she will be remembered, but also creative innovation on epigraphic conventions. There is Virgilian precedent for this innovation. As Thomas (1998) has noted, Dido's self-memorializing words in the *Aeneid* (4.651–58) are in the form of dedicatory and sepulchral epigrams. Like Virgil, Ovid uses epigraphic language to memorialize Dido, but he does not merely imitate his models, instead offering a distinctly Ovidian characterization of the queen. In *Ars Amatoria* 3.39–42, a passage that parallels the epitaphs in the *Fasti* and *Heroides*, Ovid subverts Dido's attempts to memorialize herself, giving precedence to his own distinctive characterization of her.

Ovid's innovations on the Virgilian tradition have long been recognized, with Hinds (1992) observing Ovid's "sequel" to the Dido and Aeneas episode, and Kennedy (1984) noting Virgilian influence on *Heroides* 7. Alföldy (1991) has noted the increased prominence of inscriptions in the Augustan era, and Ramsby (2007) has observed that Ovid uses the most literary inscriptions of any Augustan elegist. Dido's assertion of personal agency on her epitaph has also been discussed (Lindheim 2003, Ramsby 2007). What has not been recognized is that Ovid makes innovative use of epigraphic conventions to shape character, offering a distinctive portrayal of Dido that both imitates and subverts his Virgilian and epigraphic models.

The epitaph at *Fasti* 3.549–50 is subversive for its reversal of the close relationships between family members which are a commonplace on Roman tombstones. There are many epigraphic examples commemorating relationships between husbands and wives, including the epitaph of Antonia Maura (CIL VI 12056). In Virgil's account, Aeneas says explicitly that he has not entered into a formal marriage with Dido (Virgil *Aen.* 4.338–39), even though their

relationship appeared to Dido to be like a marriage (Virgil *Aen.* 4.170–72). Ovid's Dido creates a tombstone that mirrors the appearance of a traditional memorial provided by a husband for a wife, even going so far as to name both herself and Aeneas on the stone. Her monument is a jarring subversion that dramatizes her fate while allowing her to construct how her death and relationship with Aeneas are memorialized.

The same inscription appears in the epistle of Dido to Aeneas. In this case, Dido contrasts the tragic inscription that commemorates her death with another alternative which might have been: an inscription memorializing her as the wife of Sychaeus (*Her.* 7.191–96). Dido underscores her own authorship by proclaiming Anna's ignorance and her imminent role as the performer of Dido's last rites. Knox has observed an epigraphic parallel to "ultima dona," citing "huic coniunx ultima dona dedit" at CLE 1302.4 (Knox 1995: 232n192). Anna will perform the last rites for Dido, but she will not write her epitaph. Instead, Dido has composed her own epitaph ahead of time, preventing herself not only from being portrayed as "Elissa Sychaei," but also as "Elissa soror Annae." The fact that she gives Aeneas precedence over other family members reflects the intensity of the emotions that she feels towards him, as well as her desire to have the final say on how their relationship is constructed.

In the *Ars Amatoria* Ovid does not quote an inscription in honor of Dido directly, but he uses similar language when he mentions the queen's death (3.37–40). Here Ovid suggests that the cause of Dido's death, which readers of the *Heroides* and the *Fasti* are left to assume from the literary epitaphs and knowledge of the Virgilian tradition was Aeneas himself, was actually Dido's lack of skill in the art of love. Ovid surprises his readers by subverting their knowledge of Dido's character, and by doing so in his own voice as "Naso magister" (Ovid *Ars am.* 3.812). Collectively, these references to Dido constitute a bold response to Virgil's rich portrayal of her

character, wherein epigraphy serves as a valuable tool for Ovid, working within the elegiac genre, to reinscribe Dido in his work.

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