

HEROIDES VII: DIDO TO AENEAS

The Trojan prince Aeneas is about to leave Carthage and its queen for Italy. Dido writes to her lover and questions the merits of his impending voyage.

The white swan lies dying in Maeander's marsh grass.
And this is the last she will ever sing.
Not that I have hope you will be moved by my prayer—
God's head is turned as I write you this—
but having lost my good name, chaste body and soul,
it's a small matter to waste a few words.

Are you still determined to abandon poor Dido?
Will one wind bear off your ships and your vows?
Is it anchors aweigh and away with your promise
in pursuit of mysterious Italian realms?
Do the rising walls of new Carthage not move you?
Supreme sovereignty placed in your hands?
What's done you renounce for a newer agenda:
always another land to be sought!
And even if you find it, who would bestow
his own land upon a stranger to keep?
Another lover no doubt, another Dido
for you to deceive with false faith again.
When will you ever find a city like Carthage,
view your people from a high citadel?
And if all this did come true, when would you ever
find a wife to love you as I do?

I am burning like a sulfur-tipped waxen torch,
like incense smoldering in sacred fire.
Aeneas is glazed on my sleepless eyes; I whisper
"Aeneas" in the still of the night.

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Yes, he's an ingrate, and if I weren't a fool,
a cad I'd happily do without.
But I can't hate Aeneas, however he treats me.
Complain, and I fall more deeply in love.
Spare your son's bride, Venus! Press your callous brother,
O brother Cupid, into your service.
Or at least let him serve as the passive object
in this love affair I admit I began.

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No, that's just an illusion that I've conjured up:
the man has none of his mother's genes.
You were born of rocks and scrub oaks in the mountains,
feral predators brought you to life,
or the sea, which you see pestered by winds, as you
prepare to set sail against the tide.
Where are you going in this storm? (Thank God for this storm!)
Look how the East Wind ruffles the waves.
I'll owe to bad weather what I'd rather owe you;
wind and wave are more just than your heart.
I'm hardly worth the price of a lonely death at sea.
(But why can't you be wrongly appraised?)
It's a highly expensive hatred you cherish
if to be rid of me, you count death cheap.
The winds will fall soon, and on seas flat as a road
Triton will drive his turquoise horses.
If only you would change like the winds—and you will,
unless your heart is harder than oak.
You have experience of how wild the sea is.
Why do you foolishly trust it now?

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Loosen your moorings when the sea invites travel—
and still the deep is a wide, grim place.
It's risky for oathbreakers to tempt the waters,
where treachery meets its punishment,
especially when Love is injured: the mother of Loves
was seaborne nude in Cythera's waves.

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I'm done for and fear to do in my aggressor,
fear that my enemy will drown at sea!
Live! I pray for it: I can better destroy you
by having you called the cause of my death.

Imagine you are caught—let this be no omen!—
in hurricane winds. What will be your thoughts?
All the lies your tongue told will rush through your mind,
and Dido dead by Phrygian fraud.
The image of your wife will loom up before you,
betrayed and sad, with wild, bloody hair.
What good will it do then to say, "I'm so sorry,"
when you think the lightning is aimed at you?
It's well worth putting off the sea's spite (and your own).
Delay now and sail safely later.

Never mind all that. But spare little Iulus.
Enough to have my death to your name.
Does Ascanius deserve this? And are your Penates,
rescued from fire, doomed now to drown?
You don't even have those sacred relics, you cheat.
Never shouldered them or your father.
You lie about everything, and I'm not the first
to be deceived by your fraudulent tongue.
Where is lovely Iulus's mother? She died alone,
abandoned by her heartless husband.
The story you told was warning enough. Burn me—
I deserve worse for what I have done.

There is no doubt in my mind your own gods condemn you—
seven years a derelict on land and sea.
The waves washed you up, and I gave you safe refuge,
hardly knew your name and gave you my throne.
I wish I had been content with these services,
and our affair had never come to light.
I was ruined on the day when that blue thunderstorm
chased us into the hillside cave.

I heard voices and thought it was the nymphs wailing.
It was the Furies sounding my doom.
Punish me, bruised Chastity! I violated your trust Sychaeus . . .

[gap in manuscript]

Chastened, I go to my punishment.

I have Sychaeus's statue in a marble shrine,
sanctified with white fillets, green fronds.
Four times I have heard his familiar voice whisper,
"Elissa, come," from inside the crypt.
No more delays! Your wife is coming, Sychaeus,
late because of her self-confessed shame!
Forgive me, darling. My seducer's nobility
reduces the hatefulness of my sin.
His goddess-birth, how he carried his father,
gave me hope of a lasting marriage.
If I made a mistake, it was an honorable one. If he
had been faithful, I would have no regrets.

My past still haunts me, and the tenor of my life
remains unchanged until my final hour.
My husband is slaughtered at our household altars,
my brother reaps the heinous rewards.
I'm forced into exile, leave my husband's ashes,
endure the hazards of hostile pursuit.
I put in at these shores, escape brother and sea,
and buy the coast I gave to you, traitor.
I found a city, and the long sweep of its walls
arouses the natives' jealousy.
War looms to test me, a foreigner and woman.
I slap up gates and prepare to fight.
I'm found desirable. A thousand suitors complain
I prefer some nobody's love to theirs.

Why not just tie me up and give me to Iarbas?
Here are my arms. Come do your worst.
Then there is my brother, whose hand craves to be smeared
with Dido's as well as her husband's gore.

And as for impious hands, drop those gods from yours!
Your profane touch offends high heaven. 130
Your gods must regret they didn't burn in Troy's flames
if you are their designated devotee.

And just maybe, you swine, you're leaving me pregnant,
part of your body lurking in mine.
The poor little thing will suffer the fate of its mother,
and you will murder an unborn child.
Iulus's baby brother will die along with his parent,
one punishing blow taking two intertwined lives.

But God orders you to go! I wish he had ordered
your Phrygian feet off Punic soil. 140
The same god no doubt was your guide as you floundered
around the Mediterranean for years.
You could have regained Troy with hardly more effort—
if Hector lived and Troy were still great.
It's not your Simois but the Tiber you seek. Why?
To be an alien when you arrive.

But the land of your dreams eludes your ships so well,
you'll be an old man before you sail in.
Quit wandering, and take as my dowry this nation,
and with it Pygmalion's smuggled wealth. 150
Do Troy a favor: transfer it to our Tyrian town,
and assume the sacred scepter of king.
Do you have a taste for war? Does little Iulus
need a triumphal march of his own?
We'll provide every need for a foe to subdue.
We have peace under law, but warfare too.

But please, by your mother, by your brother's arrows,
by your refugee Dardanian gods:
may the remnant that Mars has left of your people
all survive, may you lose no more, 160
may Ascanius live a long and happy life,
and Anchises's old bones rest in peace—
only spare the house that invites your possession!
What can you accuse me of but love?
I am not from Phthia or mighty Mycenae,
no man of mine has been hostile to Troy.
Are you ashamed to call me your wife? Your hostess then.
Anything at all, as long as I'm yours.

I know how the seas that pound my African shores
grant and deny passage in season. 170
When the wind allows it, you will spread out your sails.
Seaweed curls around your beached ship now.
Leave the weather to me. You will sail more safely.
Even if you wished, I wouldn't let you stay.
Your men need a vacation, and your battered fleet,
half-repaired, calls for a brief delay.
By the respect you've earned, by what I still hope to owe—
hope of marriage—grant me some time,
time for the seas and my love to grow calm, time for me
to learn how to bear my sorrow bravely. 180
If not, my mind is made up to take my own life.
You cannot be cruel to Dido for long.

If only you could see what a picture I make,
writing with your Trojan sword on my lap!
Tears fall from my cheeks onto the naked metal,
soon to be tintured with blood instead.
What an appropriate gift! Just what I need
to implement my funeral rites.
But this is not the first weapon to strike my breast.
It's wounded already by savage love. 190

Anna, my sister, you share my guilty conscience.

Soon, you will lay my ashes to rest.

Do not inscribe, "Here lies Sychaeus's Elissa"

on my tombstone, but this epitaph:

AENEAS PROVIDED THE MOTIVE AND WEAPON,

BUT DIDO'S DEATH WAS BY HER OWN HAND.

HEROIDES VIII: HERMIONE TO ORESTES

Hermione, daughter of Helen and Menelaus, was originally betrothed to Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. During the Trojan War, however, her father promised her to the son of Achilles, Neoptolemus, also called Pyrrhus. It is during this marriage that she writes to Orestes.

[two spurious lines omitted]

Achilles's son Pyrrhus, as self-willed as his father,

keeps me shut away against all moral norms.

I've done all I could, refused to be in detention;

my woman's hands could do no more than that.

"What are you doing, Pyrrhus? I'm not without a defender;

I have in fact a master of my own."

He was deaf as the sea when I shrieked out, "Orestes!"

and dragged me disheveled into his house.

It couldn't have been worse if Sparta had been taken

and I were enslaved by barbarians.

Andromache was not as abused by the victorious Achaeans

when Danaan fire destroyed wealthy Troy.

But you, Orestes, if you care for me, if you have any pity,

lay claim to what's yours with no timid hand!

You would fight if anyone rustled your cattle,

but drag your feet when someone steals your wife?

When it comes to this, you should be like Menelaus,

whose stolen spouse was a cause for war.

Had he just snored away in his deserted palace, my mother

would still be in her marriage to Paris.

You don't have to launch a thousand ships, don't have to

raise an army—just get yourself here!

Not that I'm not worth being redeemed by a battle,

and it's good for a husband to fight for his wife.