

Sleeping with the enemy

She was Cleopatra's precursor and a model for Elizabeth I - and she might just be the archetypal ex-wife. Gary Taylor on the allure of Dido

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Saturday June 7, 2003
The Guardian

The tragedy of Dido, Queen of Carthage is not about Dido. It is not about Carthage, either. It's about something else entirely. Tragedy always is. It's not that Carthage, or its women, would be an inappropriate subject for tragedy. Once the chief rival to Roman power in the Mediterranean, Carthage was finally destroyed in 147BC. Only 50,000 Carthaginians were left alive, out of an original population of half a million. The survivors were sold as slaves. The land was ploughed with salt. Total victory.

The site of that celebrated atrocity is now a posh suburb of Tunis. The president of Tunisia lives there in a beachside palace. His picture, in a western suit, is displayed in all the hotels. (Don't ask me what I was doing in Tunisian hotels: it's a long story involving an Italian visa, an illicit love affair, and a policeman.)

Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nashe, who wrote this tragedy about Carthage, had never seen it. They had just read about Dido in their school textbooks. Today, Carthage is a United Nations Heritage of Humanity site, and busloads of schoolchildren disembark daily at the big museum at the top of the hill, where the Carthaginian acropolis stood for centuries. From the summit, the original harbour looks like a little fishing village. By the standards of modern continental super- powers, ancient city states were surprisingly small, intimate places.

To that small harbour came, 28 centuries ago, a Phoenician expedition led by a woman, who planted the colony that became Carthage. She chose well. From the summit you can still see, over the broken marble columns unearthed by archaeologists, past the tasteless French cathedral built by a later conqueror, the entire magnificent coastline. What better base for a maritime empire?

The woman who founded Carthage may have been an exile or a refugee, but she was demonstrably a leader, and a survivor. She bore no resemblance to the self-destructive hysterical heroine of Dido, Queen of Carthage . Marlowe and Nashe didn't know that, because they saw Dido through the eyes of Virgil. The Aeneid , the official pinnacle of Latin literature, was the single most influential poem in Europe for at least 17 centuries. But like the English tragedy, the Latin epic is not really about Dido or Carthage. Carthage had been wiped out almost 80 years before Virgil was born. He never met a Carthaginian. They were an extinct species.

Virgil and his readers cared about Dido because they cared about Cleopatra. Like Virgil's character, Cleopatra was the widowed queen of a north African kingdom that, like Carthage, had challenged Rome's right to dominate the Mediterranean. But unlike Dido, Cleopatra shaped and disturbed the world that Virgil inhabited. For us Cleopatra is history; for Virgil she was the daily news. For us, she is a former or current half-dressed Hollywood sex symbol in a big-budget spectacular. For Virgil, she was Osama bin Laden.

Actually, she was worse. I doubt that many Americans have wet dreams about Osama. Cleopatra was so disturbing to Virgil's generation because she was simultaneously terrifying and arousing. Try to imagine how we would have been affected by CNN images of Colin Powell in bed with Saddam Hussein: one of our own great military heroes, sleeping with the enemy.

Cleopatra's political and sexual alliance with Mark Antony was defeated by Virgil's patron, Octavian (later the emperor Augustus). Not long after, Virgil told his contemporaries a story about "pious Aeneas", who was seduced by a north-African queen. But unlike Mark Antony, Aeneas in the end recognised his sacred duty, and left the bitch. Like the defeated Cleopatra, the defeated Dido then committed suicide.

When Virgil told this story, Dido had been dead for 800 years. By the time Marlowe and Nashe told it, Cleopatra had been dead for 1,600. Neither was news. In England in the 1580s, neither was keeping men up at night. In any sense. So why write a tragedy about Dido? Why perform it? Why pay to see it?

Because England, in the 1580s, was particularly interested in the founding of the Roman empire. Because Englishmen, in the 1580s, were beginning to imagine that the next great European empire might be their own. Because educated Englishmen in the 1580s, like Marlowe and Nashe, still believed that Aeneas was their own ancestor: that his grandson Brutus had sailed to found the ancient kingdom of Britain, and had ruled over the entire island.

Because, because, because. Pick up any book on Marlowe, or any article on Dido, Queen of Carthage, written in the past 15 years, and you'll get pretty much the same answer. Pick at any thread of the plot, and you will soon find yourself entangled in Elizabethan politics. Queen Dido was also called Elissa, which the play emended to Eliza, forcing audiences to think about their own unmarried queen, Elizabeth (and the rumours of her affair with Sir Walter Raleigh, or the Earl of Leicester). English merchants, since the 1560s, had started poaching on the Portuguese trade in African slaves, and so in the 1580s Englishmen were particularly interested in a story that contrasted African Dido and European Aeneas. In the 1580s, the clash between Spanish and English seapower, culminating in the defeat of the Spanish Armada, might be imagined as a replay of the wars between Rome and Carthage for control of the sea.

Dido is not Dido, Aeneas is not Aeneas, Carthage is not Carthage. Literature, it turns out, is just history in disguise. Literary criticism whips off the disguise.

But if that is the case, why should I bother to read the play? Why should I go to the theatre? It's expensive, going to the theatre. It was in the 1580s, and it still is. If it's history all the way down, why not skip all those layers of camouflage, and go straight to the pay-dirt? If Virgil's Dido is Cleopatra, if Marlowe's Aeneas is Sir Francis Drake or Sir Walter Raleigh, why not just read about the real people?

In this properly sceptical, properly historical frame of mind, I pick up my copy of Dido, Queen of Carthage, and open to one of Dido's speeches to Aeneas. He has already told her he intends to leave.

Why star'st thou in my face? If thou wilt stay,

Leap in mine arms: mine arms are open wide.

If not, turn from me, and I'll turn from thee;

For though thou hast the heart to say farewell,

I have not power to stay thee.

The text doesn't say so, but there has to be a pause here. She has turned her back on him, and dared him to leave. He leaves. She waits for him to reply. He doesn't. At a certain point she has to realise what has happened. "Is he gone?" she asks. Another pause. No answer. So she answers herself.

Ay, but he'll come again, he cannot go,

He loves me too too well to serve me so.

I don't hear Queen Elizabeth here, or Cleopatra, or the Spanish Armada. I hear my ex-wife.

It's not very scholarly of me to interpret an Elizabethan play in terms of my own life. But that is what we all do in the theatre, or when we sit on a bench or a beach, reading silently to ourselves.

Tragedy originated in little city-states. It has always been an intimate little genre. Dido, Queen of Carthage was originally performed by the Children of the Chapel Royal, in a small, exclusive indoor theatre. Theatres are always intimate, no matter how big they are, because they let us simultaneously express and disguise our most private feelings. If we laugh, if tears start streaming down our cheeks, no one will ask why. We all pretend that it's about Dido, and Carthage.

Yes, it's history all the way down. But which history? Whose? "Local reading", literary theorists call it, stealing a phrase from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz: in order to read texts properly, in order to understand their thick rich descriptions of the real, you have to situate them in a specific cultural locality. What you see, in Carthage or anywhere else, depends on where and when you are standing.

On top of that hill at Carthage, I can look at the entire panorama of the Bay of Tunis, or at the harbour down the hill, or at the woman standing by the broken column, or at her face, or in her eyes. Yes, Dido, Queen of Carthage is about the English decision, in the reign of Elizabeth I, to found an empire like Rome's. It may even be about something as specific as the English sack of Cartagena. But it is also about the long, local, repetitive history of human infidelity. If our hominid ancestors in any way resembled our nearest primate relatives, or ourselves, then homo sapiens sapiens has always been tempted to have sex when it shouldn't. Men have been leaving women, and women have been leaving men, as long as there have been men and women.

Dido, Queen of Carthage is not about Dido, or about Carthage. It's about an Italian visa, an illicit affair with an exotic-looking woman, and a policeman who told me I should leave the country as quickly as possible.

• Dido, Queen of Carthage is in rep at Shakespeare's Globe, London SE1, until August 18. Box office: 020-7401 9919.

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