

## SYCHAEUS

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THERE ARE MINOR CHARACTERS who owe their literary existence to the light they shed on major ones. Such, in the *Aeneid*, is Dido's Tyrian husband Sychaeus. Though known to him from tradition,<sup>1</sup> this figure need not have found a place in the plot of Virgil's poem. He belongs to τὰ προγεγεννημένα. When we first encounter Dido, he is already dead. He takes part in the action only as a ghost. Examination of the uses Virgil found for this figure promises disclosures about Dido and the nature of her heroism, in particular the answer to the question whether it is consistent with her stature as a tragic heroine<sup>2</sup> for Dido to be so closely bound to another character as she is to Sychaeus.

Virgil is very careful in setting the stage for the first encounter of Aeneas and Dido. In fact, the psychological preparation takes place in four stages: (1) Venus' narration of Dido's exile from Tyre and founding of Carthage (1.340–368); (2) Aeneas' inspection of the decoration of the temple of Juno, which convinces him that his name will not be unknown in Carthage and inspires the hope that he will find a sympathetic reception here (1.446–493); (3) Ilioneus' speech before Dido, in which he describes the Trojans' sufferings and mentions Aeneas' noble qualities (1.522–558); and (4) Dido's response culminating in the hope that Aeneas himself will appear (1.562–578). Thus the poet creates a bond of mutual respect and sympathy before the two principals ever meet.<sup>3</sup>

Venus' account of Dido's exile, including the first mention of Sychaeus, is carefully designed to forge the first link in that bond: it provides Dido with a background of suffering and exile similar to Aeneas' own. Virgil has taken the main outline of the story of Sychaeus' murder by Dido's brother Pygmalion from a historical source (Timaeus? cf. *FGrHist* 566 F 82) similar to (identical with?) that used by Pompeius Trogus. A comparison of Virgil's narrative with the relevant chapter of Justin's epitome of Trogus (18.4) shows that the poet's alterations serve to increase Aeneas' (as well, of course, as the reader's) sympathy with Dido and her sufferings.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Serv. *ad Aen.* 1.343.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. V. Pöschl, *The Art of Vergil: Image and Symbol in the Aeneid*, tr. G. Seligson (Ann Arbor 1962) 71 = *Die Dichtkunst Virgils: Bild und Symbol in der Aeneis*<sup>3</sup> (Berlin and New York 1977) 96.

<sup>3</sup>This development is sensitively sketched by Friedrich Klingner, *Virgil* (Zürich and Stuttgart 1967) 397 ff.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Richard Heinze, *Virgils epische Technik*<sup>3</sup> (Leipzig and Berlin 1928) 119–120 n. 2.

First, Virgil presents Sychaeus' murder, like that of Priam (*Aen.* 2.550–553), as an act of sacrilege by making it take place at an altar.<sup>5</sup> Next, after the murder, Virgil suppresses two deceitful acts which Justin (18.4.9–16) attributes to Dido and instead makes Dido the victim of the cruel ruse by which Pygmalion conceals her husband's death.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore the corpse of the Virgilian Sychaeus remains unburied after the murder (1.353); hence, according to Greco-Roman belief, the soul would be denied admission to Hades. The doctrine presented in the *Aeneid* is that the souls of the *insepulti* have to wait one hundred years before being allowed to cross the Styx (6.325–330 and 373–375).<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Virgil has Sychaeus' ghost appear to Dido in a dream.<sup>8</sup> If the very appearance of the battered Hector so deeply touched the dreaming Aeneas (2.270–280), the effect of the dream vision of Sychaeus on Dido must be much greater still: he is not merely her friend, but her husband; and she now learns for the first time of his sacriligious murder by her own brother. Like Aeneas' visions of the ghosts of Hector and Anchises (4.351–353 and 5.722–739), this visitant urges Dido to action, but not to the revenge and/or burial that one might expect to be demanded by the

<sup>5</sup>Not during a boar hunt, as in Malalas (*Chronogr.* 6.68 DE [206–207 Ox.]: he is evidently relying on a fuller version of Servius than that now extant: *ὁ δὲ σοφώτατος Σέββιος ὁ Ῥωμαῖος ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῦ συγγράμμασιν ἐξέθετο . . .*; however, Malalas is not cited among the testimonia in *Servianorum in Vergilii Carmina Commentariorum editio Harvardiana*, ed. E. K. Rand *et al.*, 2 [Lancaster, Pa. 1947] *ad Aen.* 1.343–364). Justin 18.4.8 leaves the place and circumstances of the murder unspecified.

<sup>6</sup>The Virgilian Dido need not resort to a ruse to fill out her crew because Pygmalion has been assimilated to the stereotype of the tyrant: *conveniunt, quibus aut odium crudele tyranni / aut metus acer erat*; . . . (1.361–362). *odium* as a motive may have its origin in a tradition similar to that of Justin 18.4.9 (. . . . *quibus par odium in regem esse . . . arbitrabatur*). At *Aen.* 4.545–546, however, Dido represents the difficulties of assembling a party of fellow-exiles as more difficult than appears from our passage: . . . *quibus Sidonia vix urbe revelli, / rursus agam pelago . . .*?

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Cyril Bailey, *Religion in Virgil* (Oxford 1935) 244–246; Franz Cumont, *Lux Perpetua* (Paris 1949) 22, 84.

<sup>8</sup>Surely this element, so appropriate to epic (see Publius Virgilius Maro, ed. C. G. Heyne, ed. quarta curavit G. P. E. Wagner, 2 [Leipzig 1832] 239 [exc. 11 on Book 1]), is Virgil's own invention. Heinze (above, n. 4) 119 n. 2 argued that the mention of the dream at Appian 8.1.1. shows that Virgil is here following a historical tradition. However, it seems more likely either that Appian himself depends on Virgil (so Lamer, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, ed. W. H. Roscher, 4 [Leipzig 1909–1915] s.v. Sychaeus, 1614–1615), or, if one accepts the view of M. Gelzer (*Bibliotheca orientalis* 14 [1957] 56; *Gnomon* 31 [1959] 180) that Appian wrote his history as an old man on the basis of a Greek compilation of Augustan date, that Appian's source, which favors "tragic" historiography, borrowed from our poet. Cf., with J. Foster, "Aeneidea," *Proceedings of the Virgil Society* 11 (1971–1972) 77–79, the appearance of the ghost of Diapontius in the tale invented by Tranio at Plautus *Most.* 497 ff.

*revenant*.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he urges Dido to leave Tyre and provides material help for the journey (*auxilium viae* 1.358) by disclosing the location of an unknown buried treasure. The deliberate compression of Virgil's narrative<sup>10</sup> somewhat obscures the vengeance motif. Later Dido boasts of having exacted revenge (4.656 *ulta virum, poenas inimico a fratre recepi*). The words at 1.363–364 (*portantur avari / Pygmalionis opes pelago*) suggest that Dido's vengeance consists in the removal of royal treasure; the reader, though not expressly told, is left to assume that this is identical with the *ignotum argenti pondus et auri* disclosed by Sychaeus' ghost.<sup>11</sup> Thus the effect of the appearance of the ghost is a marked heightening of pathos (*crudelis aras, traiectaque pectora ferro nudavit*<sup>12</sup> ... 1.355–356) and a removal of any odium that might otherwise have attached to Dido's decision to withdraw from her native land by connecting it with an act of vengeance. The ghost of Creusa which appears to Aeneas on the night of the fall of Troy fills an analogous function (2.771 ff.): it is the pathos-laden culmination of a crescendo of warnings to leave Troy (2.281 ff., 594 ff. [if genuine], the signs interpreted by Anchises at 680 ff.). Sychaeus as a ghostly visitant, then, helps to direct the sympathies of Aeneas, who has had a remarkably similar experience, in Dido's favor.

The figure of Sychaeus likewise proves invaluable to Virgil in the following phase of action when the firmly founded *amicitia* of Dido and Aeneas turns into *amor*. Dido in *Aeneid* 4 has most often been compared to Medea, whether of Apollonian or Euripidean stamp.<sup>13</sup> A no less fruitful comparison can be made, however, with Antigone. Like Antigone, Dido sets for herself a higher standard of morality than the ordinary person is prepared to accept (note the roles of Ismene and Anna as foils for the respective heroines); and, as in Antigone's case, it is a tie with a deceased person (Polynices / Sychaeus) which is a factor in bringing the heroine into conflict with an objective situation (Creon's decree / Aeneas' Italian mission).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Erwin Rohde, *Psyche. Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, ed. 9–10, 1 (Tübingen 1925) 259 ff. (= *Psyche: the Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, tr. W. B. Hillis [London and New York 1925] 174 ff.); Cumont (above, n. 7) 59, 84–85; E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1959) 127 n. 52. Cf. now Charles Fuqua, "Hector, Sychaeus and Deiphobus: Three Mutilated Figures in *Aeneid* 1–6," *CP* 77 (1982) 237–238 for a comparison of Hector and Sychaeus as dream-visitants.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. *Aen.* 1.341–342: ... *longa est iniuria, longae / ambages; sed summa sequar fastigia rerum*.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. James Henry, *Aeneidea or Critical, Exegetical and Aesthetical Remarks on the Aeneis*, 1 (London and Edinburgh 1873) 639 ff.

<sup>12</sup>On the zeugma, *id.* 636 f.

<sup>13</sup>Cf., e.g., Pöschl (above, n. 2) 77 (= 101, 3rd German edn.).

<sup>14</sup>The role of Sychaeus as a blocking figure is adumbrated at the end of Book 1, where the

Dido's conflict is between loyalty to the memory of Sychaeus<sup>15</sup> and her budding love for Aeneas. She is a woman who has known love and is thereby enabled to recognize it again (4.23). In Antigone's case the conflict is between loyalty to the dead Polynices and the desire to go on living, since she knows that the consequence of burying Polynices must be her death. Life for her will entail marriage; indeed, she is betrothed to Haemon, Creon's son. In her last appearance onstage Antigone repeatedly calls attention to the fact that the next transition in her life is to be death, not the expected move from a father's to a husband's house (810 ff., 867 ff., 876, 891);<sup>16</sup> but this is a generic concern; whether because of maidenly modesty or because under the arranged-marriage system a woman's feelings only take definite shape after marriage, she has nothing to say specifically about Haemon. Haemon is never allowed to assume for her the significance that Aeneas has for Dido. We never see the two together onstage, can never measure the effect that Haemon has on her, as we can with Aeneas and Dido (4.9 ff.). In the absence of an intense conflict within Antigone, Sophocles shifts emphasis in the latter part of his play to the conflict of loyalties within Haemon. Virgil modulates the phases of Dido's passion with such skill that *Aeneid* 4 requires no such diversion.

Dido differs, too, in that she is no ordinary woman but a head of state. As a woman without citizen rights in the *πόλις* Antigone feels her highest obligation to be to her family. Dido, however, feels herself bound not merely by personal obligations but also state duties; and this fact provides the entering wedge for Anna's argument for alliance with Aeneas: *raisons d'état* dictate it (4.39 ff.). This aspect lends depth to Dido's tragedy, which is not a simple case of passion overruling reason, though in the event passion carries all before it, so that both monarchs forget their public missions (4.86 ff. and 265 ff.).

Sychaeus' influence during Dido's final hours is comparable to his role at that other critical juncture in her life, her decision to leave Tyre. Here Virgil chooses to emphasize the subjective character of Dido's experience (*visa*) and makes the temple where her husband's ghost resides the medium:

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first task of Cupid, disguised as Ascanius, is to wipe the memory of Sychaeus from Dido's heart (1.719–722).

<sup>15</sup>Note that at one point Dido, curiously, represents the precedent of Sychaeus as not a positive but a negative one, as if his death had been a kind of deception: *postquam primus amor deceptam morte fefellit* (4.17). Might we have here a subtle foreshadowing of the deception she will again suffer at the hands of a man? On the ideal of the matron who is *univira* cf. Henry (above, n. 11) 633; Edward Phinney, Jr., "Dido and Sychaeus," *CJ* 60 (1964–65) 356; Gordon Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford 1968) 378 ff.; on *Aen.* 4.548–552 *id.* 30 f.; Pöschl (above, n. 2) 77, 83 (= 101, 109, 3rd German edn.).

<sup>16</sup>On the similarities of funerary and wedding ritual cf. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge 1974) 120 ff.

*praeterea fuit in tectis de marmore templum  
coniugis antiqui, miro quod honore colebat,  
velleribus niveis et festa fronde revinctum:  
hinc exaudiri voces et verba vocantis  
visa viri, nox cum terras obscura teneret, ...* 4.457–461

Though Venus' narrative did not include a request by Sychaeus' ghost to bury his body or any attempt by Dido to do so, Anna's remark at 4.34 (*id cinerem aut manis credis curare sepultos?*) suggests that rites of burial were performed for Sychaeus. One might, accordingly, have expected in our passage a reference to a cenotaph (*tumulus inanis*) for the deceased, such as that which Andromache raised for Hector (3.301–305) or Aeneas for Deiphobus (6.505–506). However, the use of the word *templum*, which suggests rather the shrine of a Greek hero cult, serves the poet's purpose of emphasizing once again the sanctity which Dido attaches to the marital tie (4.457–458 just quoted).<sup>17</sup> By a reversal of the rite by which his survivors summon the spirit of the deceased to the tomb, Sychaeus' ghost seems to summon the living Dido to death.<sup>18</sup> Dido is now reminded of the tie she has lost sight of, a bond to replace the now broken bond with Aeneas, but one which connects her with the world of the dead, rather than the living.<sup>19</sup> The summons of Sychaeus, together with other signs, helps prepare the atmosphere for Dido's suicide.<sup>20</sup>

It is during Aeneas' underworld journey that we encounter Dido and Sychaeus for the last time. The locus is the Fields of Mourning, where dwell those *quos durus amor crudeli tabe peredit* (6.442). Like other shades in the outer zones of Hades, these are still preoccupied with the concerns of their earthly life: *curae non ipsa in morte relinquunt* (6.444). In this environment Dido may be said to be *recens a vulnere* in both a physical and psychological sense, and her wandering (*errabat silva in magna* 6.451) is reminiscent of her behavior when in the throes of passion (4.68–69 *totaque vagatur / urbe furens*). Thus, when Aeneas catches an uncertain glimpse of her shade and addresses her in an attempt to excuse his conduct, her appearance betrays her feelings (*ardentem et torva tuentem* 6.467). The

<sup>17</sup>Bailey (above, n. 7) 281–283, while not discussing our passage, would restrict the influence of hero cult to instances in which blood-offerings are presented to the dead on an altar; if applied to our passage, this doctrine would place excessive restrictions on the evocative powers of the poet's words.

<sup>18</sup>On the *conclamatio* immediately after death cf. Kurt Latte, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (Munich 1960) 101; on the summoning of the spirits of the dead to partake in offerings cf. Bailey (above, n. 7) 292. Characteristically, Ovid works out in detail what Virgil was content merely to suggest (*Her.* 7.101 ff.).

<sup>19</sup>Cf., again, the Sophoclean Antigone, who feels her most important bond to be with the dead (*Ant.* 72–76).

<sup>20</sup>Pöschl (above, n. 2) 87 (= 118–119, 3rd German edn.) is right to call these elements symptoms rather than motives for her decision.

proud woman's response is by no means unexpected, except perhaps for the reference to Sychaeus with which the episode concludes:

*illa solo fixos oculos aversa tenebat  
nec magis incepto vultum sermone movetur  
quam si dura silex aut stet Marpesia cautes.  
tandem corripuit sese atque inimica refugit  
in nemus umbriferum, coniunx ubi pristinus illi  
respondet curis aequatque Sychaeus amorem* 6.469–474

The other denizens of the Fields of Mourning whom Virgil names are all heroines of myth who have suffered disaster because of love;<sup>21</sup> none appears in the company of a lover or spouse. Sychaeus' presence therefore sets Dido apart from the others. Readers sometimes feel disappointment at this mention of Sychaeus on grounds that it compromises the independence of the heroic Dido.<sup>22</sup> However, if read in the context of the relationship of Dido and Sychaeus as developed previously, not only does it not give offense, but it seems the only poetically satisfying conclusion. Dido has been accepted back by the husband whose memory she had, as she thought, slighted. He now fills the role that Aeneas could not: *respondet curis aequatque Sychaeus amorem* (6.474). The prospect is thus opened up that, in spite of her presence in the Fields of Mourning as a result of her recent erotic misfortune, Dido can find in the next world the satisfying relationship denied to her in life by Sychaeus' untimely death<sup>23</sup> and Aeneas' abrupt departure. Without mention of Sychaeus this suggestion of elevation to a higher equilibrium could not have been achieved.<sup>24</sup>

Thus in spite of the fact that the living man could play no role in the action of the *Aeneid*, Virgil found important uses for Dido's deceased husband, in arousing Dido to leave Carthage and enabling her to do so without taint of treason, in providing a hindrance on her side to an involvement with Aeneas, in facilitating her transition from life to death, and enhancing, in death, her heroic stature.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Cf., however, a slightly ambivalent case: *it comes et iuvenis quondam, nunc femina, Caeneus* (6.448).

<sup>22</sup>As evidence for this statement I can adduce the testimony of those *candidissimi lectores*, the students in my classes.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. above, n. 15.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. V. Pöschl (above, n. 2) (= 119, 3rd German edn.): "If passion obscured her true self, death confirms and maintains it on a higher and purer plane."

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