

Virgil and the Theatre: A Melodramatic Note¹

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There is already a formidable bibliography available to students of the impact of Greek and Roman tragedy on the *Aeneid*,² to which this note is no conventional addition. Let me summarise the main areas of enquiry,³ if only to sketch the context from which I hope to offer a small departure. Not only tragedy, but Aristotle's analysis thereof is a major contributor to Virgilian studies,⁴ particularly in the field of 'the tragedy of Dido'; you may write about 'pity and terror' in Virgil,⁵ about *hamartia* and *peripeteia*,⁶ about messenger-speeches in the *Aeneid*⁷ and, amply and usefully, about tragic irony.⁸ If you look carefully, you can even identify 'choral reflections' on sections of narrative.⁹ You may survey the whole wide panorama of Virgil and tragedy,¹⁰ or concentrate upon an

¹ The coincidence of pausing from the writing of my commentary on *Aeneid* 2 to review S. M. Goldberg, *Constructing literature in the Roman Republic* (see below, 225-227) prompted the line of thought that led to the composition of this note, which I offer affectionately to Hannah Cotton as a small tribute on the occasion of her retirement from the editorship of *SCI*.

² In so far as they can be distinguished; often that is not possible with any confidence: see Goldberg (n. 1), 120ff.; S. Stabryla, *Latin tragedy in Virgil's poetry* (Krakow, 1970), 19ff., etc.

³ The very latest *mise à point* is probably M. von Albrecht, *Vergil. Eine Einführung* (Heidelberg, 2006), 148.

⁴ J. Moles in: *Homo Viator. Classical Essays for John Bramble* (ed. M. Whitby, etc., Bristol, 1987), 160; A. Wlosok, *Res humanae-res divinae* (Heidelberg, 1990), 323ff. = *Studien zum antiken Epos* (ed. H. Görgemanns, etc., Meisenheim, 1976), 231ff.; F. Muecke, *AJP* 104 (1983), 134ff., etc. For Dido, see now the ample discussion, M. Fernandelli, *Quaderni del Dipartimento di Filologia ... Torino* NS1 (2002), 141-211.

⁵ R. Heinze, *Virgils epische Technik* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1928; repr. Stuttgart, 1982, etc.), 466ff.

⁶ P. Hardie in: *Cambridge companion to Virgil* (Cambridge, 1997), 325; N. Horsfall, *Companion to the study of Virgil* (Leiden, 1995), 126ff.; *peripeteia*: Muecke (n. 4), 146f.; Wlosok (n. 4), 324f.

⁷ V. Ussani, *Maia* 3 (1950), 237ff., ungratefully excerpted by G. Scafolgio, *Vichiana* 4.3.2 (2001), 187ff.; G. Highet, *Speeches in Virgil's Aeneid* (Princeton, 1972), 16; J. Foster, *PVS* 13 (1973-4), 33.

⁸ Muecke (n. 4), 134ff.; K. Quinn, *Virgil's Aeneid* (London, 1968), 330ff.

⁹ *Aen.* 2.241f., 554-8; Scafolgio (n. 7), 196, 204.

¹⁰ Cf. von Albrecht (n. 3); A. La Penna, *L'impossibile giustificazione della storia* (Bari, 2005), 164ff.

individual tragedian,¹¹ or a single play,¹² or tragic character,¹³ or scene,¹⁴ or upon tragic language, or imagery,¹⁵ or even upon the division of Virgilian narrative into apparent 'acts' and 'scenes'.¹⁶ All this valuable work let us take as done and to some extent, familiar; it now becomes possible to descend, if that is the right term, to boots, to the tragic *cothurnus*, mentioned once in the *Aeneid* (1.337), and acutely identified by E. L. Harrison¹⁷ as a 'signal'¹⁸ for the 'tragedy of Dido' then about to open. Explicit references to the world of the theatre in the *Aeneid* have recently awakened a flicker of interest (Goldberg [n. 1], 116) and it may help to have the evidence for the explicit presence of drama in the epic to hand; it does after all reinforce strongly at a surface level that vast, deeper presence recognisable only to the much more educated reader.¹⁹

4. 471 *aut Agamemnonius scaenis agitatus Orestes* (vd. infra), with
1. 429 *scaenis decora apta futuris* (the theatre at Carthage) and, very probably,²⁰
1. 164f. (the African coast) *tum siluis scaena coruscis/ desuper*,
1. 427f. *hic alta theatris/ fundamenta locant alii* with, of the stadium in Sicily,
5. 288 *mediaque in ualle theatri* and 664 *cuneosque theatri*.

In the account of the Games, we should also note the frequent applause, 5.148, 215, 338, 506, 575. It might be as well also to note, from *Georgica* 2.508ff. *hunc plausus hiantem/ per cuneos geminatus enim plebisque patrumque/ corripuit*, and the account of theatrical origins, 2.385ff.²¹ The simile, *Aen.* 4.469-73 (*Eumenidum ueluti demens uidet agmina Pentheus/ et solem geminum et duplices se ostendere Thebas,/ aut Agamemnonius scaenis agitatus Orestes,/ armatam facibus matrem et serpentibus atris/ cum fugit ultricesque sedent in limine Dirae*), has attracted marked interest recently.²² We might note that it is introduced to 'illustrate' a picture of Dido's lonely plight of distinctively Ennian character,²³ that the two mythological vignettes do *not* correspond closely with

¹¹ Cf. the *Enciclopedia virgiliana*, ss.vv.; Ussani (n. 7) is Aeschylean in emphasis, Scafoglio Euripidean. A. König, *Die Aeneis und die griechische Tragödie* (diss. Berlin, 1970) offers (250ff.) an excellent comparative survey of V.'s relationship to the three tragedians.

¹² Ussani (n. 7) concentrates on *Persae*, P. Hardie, *PVS* 20 (1991), 29ff. on the *Oresteia*.

¹³ Note Euripides' *Andromache* in *Aen.* 3; cf. Horsfall (n. 6), 134.

¹⁴ Cf. König (n. 11), 234ff.; certain scenes of Eur. *Tro.* emerge as of widest importance in *Aen.* 2. For *Andr.* 1231ff., cf. M. Fernandelli, *MD* 36 (1996), 187ff.

¹⁵ So in particular with reference to the Trojan Horse (e.g. as pregnant, as ship); for inherited snake-imagery, cf. M. Fernandelli, *Orpheus* 18 (1997), 141ff.

¹⁶ For *Aen.* 4, cf. Wlosok (n. 4), 342f.; for *Aen.* 2, J. A. S. Evans, *CJ* 58(1962/3), 256f.

¹⁷ *PVS* 12 (1972-3), 10ff.; *Eranos* 77 (1979), 51ff.

¹⁸ Cf. N. Horsfall, *Virgilio; l'epopea in Alambicco* (Napoli, 1991), 103ff. Horace's use of 'mottos' is analogous, cf. A. Cavarzere, *Sul limitare* (Bologna, 1996).

¹⁹ Cf. D. Scagliarini Corlàita, *Enc. Virg.* 4, 56-8; E. L. Harrison, *EMC* 33 (1989), 6f.; Horsfall (n. 18), 105f., 136. Goldberg (n. 1), 116ff. offers an unnecessarily minimalist account.

²⁰ Harrison (n. 19), 5 acutely notes the presence of *fronte sub aduersa* at 166, suggesting, once combined, *scaenae frons*. Goldberg (n. 1), 116, n. 1 does not persuade me.

²¹ Not to mention the curtain, *G.* 3.24f.; cf. Scagliarini Corlàita (n. 19), 58.

²² Goldberg (n. 1), 116f., unaware of the ample discussion by Fernandelli (n. 4), 155ff.

²³ *Ann.* 38-42Sk., with (e.g.) Wigodsky (n. 2), 69; Fernandelli (n. 4), 150f.; Goldberg (n. 1), 115ff.

Euripides' *Bacchae* (despite the double sun of 918f., there are no Furies) and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (torches at least are of a later iconography),²⁴ and that therefore the passage may actually have been recognisable as originating, rather, in Roman tragedy.²⁵ It will not do to forget — and Aristotle himself did not do so — a clear appetite both in Attic tragedy²⁶ and in Roman for bold, even lurid, spectacle: the audience clearly loved it,²⁷ even if the critics did not.²⁸ For Rome, the evidence is a little less familiar and may be summarised here. There were displayed at least: flames, storms, battles, ghosts, displays of booty, copious animals (the 'Aida' effect, for many modern visitors to Rome), monsters, and extravagant dress.²⁹

The influence of tragedy led Virgil to some of his very finest writing, in books 2, 3 (the Andromache-scenes), 4 and 7. But it is worth considering what implications *also* derive from existence of the 'double' public of the *Aeneid* (vd. Horsfall [n. 6], 249ff.), embraced as it was in antiquity both by the highly-educated, and by a vastly wider audience or readership who will also have relished parts at least of the Games in book 5 and in real life,³⁰ all the special effects of the tragic stage that we have just considered, and such gladiatorial elements as have been discovered in the language³¹ and possibly even scene-construction of the *Aeneid*, from evident familiarity with the real thing.³² It might therefore be worth looking briefly at (1) mad-scenes, with special reference to Furies, snakes and torches, at (2) scenes of Dionysiac possession and at (3) scenes of the sack of cities:³³

²⁴ Cf. my nn. on 7.456 (torch), 328 (snake); Goldberg (n. 1), 118.

²⁵ Cf. Harrison (n. 19), 5; Goldberg (n. 1), 115ff.

²⁶ Cf. Arist. *Poet.* 53b9, with Lucas' note and Brink (below, n. 28). For the bull in Eur. *Hipp.*, cf. S. Laigneau, *Bull. Ass. Budé* 60.4 (2001), 384.

²⁷ Cf. A. J. Boyle, *Roman tragedy* (London, 2006), 156; N. Horsfall *Culture of the Roman plebs* (London, 2003), 59; Goldberg (n. 1), 124 and *TAPA* 126 (1996), 265-70; Brink (below, n. 28); O. Ribbeck, *Die römische Tragödie* (Leipzig, 1875, repr. Hildesheim, 1968), 664f.

²⁸ For critical reaction at Rome, see Macr. 5.17.1ff., *infra* and Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.187f. with Brink's notes.

²⁹ Flames: Enn. *trag.* 26f. Jocelyn. Storms: Pacuv. *trag.* 336 Ribb.; Cic. *Fam.* 8.2.1; F. W. Wright, *Cicero and the theater* (Northampton, Mass., 1931), 4. Battles: Plaut. *Capt.* 62; Cic. *Fam.* 7.1.2 (a live re-run of the sack of Troy, or a *praetexta*?) but e.g. Pacuv. *Paullus* 3 Ribb. and Enn. *trag.* 164, 165 Jocelyn derive probably from messenger-speeches; possibly compare Hor. *Ep.* 2.1.190 (where vd. Brink) and Wright, *op. cit.*, 34, 73. Ghosts: Pacuv. *trag.* 197 Ribb.; Cic. *Tusc.* 1.106; Wright, *op. cit.*, 29, 58; Boyle (n. 27), 94f. Displays of booty: Cic. *Fam.* 8.2.1 (3000 bowls, suggestive of Pompey's triumph, Boyle [n. 27], 156). Animals: *sescenti muli* Cic. *Fam.* 8.2.1. Monsters: Lucil. 587, winged flying dragons, who may well be tragic-theatrical (cf. Ribbeck [n. 27], 665, n. 99). Dress: Hor. *Ep.* 1.6.40ff., Plut. *Lucull.* 39.5.

³⁰ For the Games and Augustan athletics, cf. W. W. Briggs, *Stadion* 1 (1975), 267ff.; H. A. Harris, *PVS* 8 (1968-9), 15ff., Horsfall's note on 3.280 and L. Polverini, *Enc. Virg.* 3, 274-7.

³¹ Cf. my note on 2.148 (forthcoming).

³² A thematic impact argued for bk.12 by A. J. E. Bell, *TAPA* 129 (1999), 263ff.

³³ G. M. Paul, 'Urbs capta', *Phoenix* 36 (1982), 144ff. remains indispensable; cf. also A. Ziolkowski, in: *War and society in the Roman world* (ed. J. Rich, etc., London, 1993), 69ff.

(1) We have just seen Dido compared to Pentheus and Orestes, and should also consider Amata, maddened by Allecto at 7.323-405; she will eventually hang herself too, *mentem turbata* [12.599] ... *multaque per maestum demens effata furorem* (601). 'Mad-scenes' are in general highly popular on the Roman stage,³⁴ and the task of the Furies, to madden their victims, was familiar in Roman tragedy before Virgil's boldly dramatic scenes of Amata and Allecto's serpent, and of Turnus woken by Allecto's torch.³⁵ Madness is also present in scenes of (2) Dionysiac possession. Note in particular Pacuv. *trag.* inc. 422f. *flexanima tamquam lumpata aut Bacchi sacris/ commota*, a comparison that anticipates closely the simile of *Aen.* 4.469f.; contrast Ennius, *trag.* 49 Jocelyn, Helen compared to a Fury (see Jocelyn, 218). A *Bacchae* of Accius is attested, a *Pentheus* of Pacuvius, a *Lycurgus* of Naevius.³⁶ (3) Battle-scenes, we have seen, are attested³⁷ in Roman tragedy. Above all, the *Iliou Persis* and the Trojan tragedies bring the themes of the *urbs capta* (n. 33) repeatedly onto the tragic stage, themes shared between epic, tragedy and history. In the *Aeneid*, *urbs capta* spills out far beyond book 2³⁸ and we might note 2.746 *aut quid in euersa uidi crudelius urbe* (even, that is, by the stock standards of an *urbs capta*, this was too much); 4.669-71, the simile of the fall of Carthage or Tyre; 12.596, Amata anticipates the sack of Latinus' city *incessi muros, ignis ad tecta uolare*. Between Livius' *Equos Troianus* and (?)*Achilles*, Naevius' *Equos Troianus* and *Hector proficiscens*, Ennius' *Achilles*, *Alexander*, *Andromacha*, *Hectoris lutra*, *Hecuba*, Pacuvius' *Hermione*, *Iliona* and *Teucer* (though all three belong to later phases in the mythical chronology), and Accius' *Achilles*, *Myrmidones*, *Deiphobus*, *Neoptolemus*, *Astyanax*, *Troades*, and *Hecuba* there seems to have been room enough for the sufferings of the sack of Troy to be quite fully aired on the Roman tragic stage, perhaps on occasion with some particularly horrible recent, Roman instance in mind. Analogies between *urbes captae* in Virgil and Livy, though, may just as well lead us to Ennius, *Annales*³⁹ as to tragedy, or indeed to what is called 'tragic history.'⁴⁰

The matter of *Aeneid* 2 is of such universal tragic character that it does not lead us unequivocally back to the Roman tragic stage. Tragic Furies and Bacchantes, though,

For the special suffering of women in the *urbs direpta*, cf. now P. Loman, *GR* 51 (2004), 40ff.; A. Chaniotis, *War in the Hellenistic world* (London, 2005), 111ff.

³⁴ Cassandra: Enn. *trag.* 36 Jocelyn (cf. 266). Tereus: Acc. *trag.* 638f. Ribb.; Boyle (n. 27), 134. Ajax(?): *trag.* inc. 66 (cf. *ib.* 57). Cf. also Enn. *trag.* 16ff., with Jocelyn, 191, and Goldberg (n. 1), 123 for comic parody.

³⁵ Cf. Jocelyn on Enn. *trag.* 24f.; it does not matter whether the flames are the Furies' or those of Alcmeo's madness: Furies, fire and frenzy are all present. The Furies' serpents are apparently absent from Roman tragedy (above, n. 24; see, however the powerful evidence from Macrobius *infra*), but their torches are amply attested, Enn. *Alcmeo*, *trag.* 25-6 Jocelyn. In the *Alcmeo*, Diana actually hurls a torch like Virgil's Allecto, Enn. *trag.* 29 Jocelyn, and Ennius did write a *Eumenides*.

³⁶ Note also the language of Santra *trag.* 2 Ribb. *furenter omni a parte bacchatur nemus*.

³⁷ Above, n. 29.

³⁸ Cf. Paul (n. 33), 151.

³⁹ Cf. Paul (n. 33), 151f.; Ziolkowski (n. 33), 70.

⁴⁰ Cf. Paul (n. 33), 145; A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in classical historiography* (London, 1988), 116, n. 151; J. Cobet, in: *Past perspectives* (ed. I. Moxon, etc., Cambridge, 1986), 17; F. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley, 1972), 34ff.

made a clear, deep and lasting impression. In a famous passage (5.17.1), Macrobius launches into a swingeing attack on Virgil: *quid Vergilio contulerit Homerus hinc maxime liquet quod, ubi rerum necessitas exegit a Marone dispositionem inchoandi belli, quam non habuit Homerus ... laboravit ad rei nouae partum*. The whole passage, Norden realised,⁴¹ was not so much a flash of genius for Macrobius as the careful excerpting of some exceptionally acute criticism, probably of the early Empire. Macrobius continues, eventually (§3), *deorum maxima deducitur e caelo, et maxima Furiarum de Tartaris adsciscitur, sparguntur angues uelut in scaena parturientes furorem, regina non solum de penetralibus reuerentiae matronalis educitur, sed et per urbem mediam cogitur facere discursus; sed nec hoc contenta siluas petit, accitis reliquis matribus*. Not long, therefore, after Virgil wrote, Allecto's tossing of the serpent was recognised and criticised not as merely tragic, but, actively and quite specifically, as 'stagey', and it would require no great leap of reasoning to suspect that, in its fullest form, Macrobius' source accused Virgil of bringing into the epic Furies and Bacchants not from tragic texts, but actually from the tragic stage. The same criticism might then be (or indeed might have been) levelled at Virgil's other mad-scenes, at the scene of Allecto's torch and Turnus' awakening (where we might suspect that Macrobius has simply tired of excerpting his source) and potentially too at the quintessentially 'stagey'-tragic scenes of the *urbs capta*, Troy. It is refreshing to discover Virgil caught enjoying the tragic stage (then, it is agreed, definitely in decline)⁴² just as wholeheartedly as many of his readers.

Dalnacroich, Wester Ross

⁴¹ *Ennius und Vergilius* (Leipzig, 1915; repr. Stuttgart, 1966), 2ff.

⁴² Cf. Goldberg (n. 1), 119, 122ff.; Boyle (n. 27), 160ff.