

Dido, Queen of Carthage

by Christopher Marlowe

Study Guide

Theatre Pro Rata

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About the play, the playwright, and our production

Dido, Queen of Carthage is the only one of Christopher Marlowe's six plays with a female protagonist. Rather than focus on Aeneas, Virgil's hero, the survivor of Troy, and the putative founder of Rome, Marlowe elects to center his story on the queen of Carthage, a widow who rules well and who has at this point in her story chosen not to re-marry. Marlowe explores the many variations of love in his tale: in the opening scene Jupiter, king of the gods, dallies with the young Trojan Ganymede to whom he has given immortality despite the jealousy of Juno, his wife; we are also privy to the angry maternal love expressed by Venus for her son Aeneas, whose journey is being thwarted by jealous Juno. This opening sets the stage in a heavenly realm, where the gods are not so different in their passions and behaviors than the humans on earth.

The motif continues as the gods weave in and out of the story, and their actions affect its ultimately tragic end. Love is passionate, confused, eloquent, betrayed, and mocked over the course of the play. While drawing on the classical sources provided by Virgil and Ovid, Marlowe adds his own twists to the tale, including the secondary love story of Dido's sister Anna for Iarbus, the King of Gaetulia and Dido's most persistent suitor.

The play may be Marlowe's first, although the dating is uncertain. Because it is so clearly based on classical texts, and Marlowe's work at Cambridge included a range of translations from the classics, it is likely that this play may have been the subsequent stage of his artistic development. Some scholars believe it may have been written while Marlowe was still at Cambridge. Others propose that the two-part play of *Tamburlaine the Great* was his first theatrical work.

His subsequent plays include *Doctor Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II*, and *The Massacre at Paris*.

Christopher Marlowe was born in Canterbury in February 1564, just two months earlier than fellow playwright William Shakespeare's birth at Stratford. Marlowe's father was a shoemaker who was a reasonably successful businessman; Marlowe was educated at King's School, Canterbury, and received a scholarship to Corpus Christi College at Cambridge, where it was expected that he would prepare for take holy orders and enter the Anglican Church. He earned his BA degree in 1584 and was awarded his MA 1587. Sometime during his years at Cambridge, he became involved with the Queen's secret service "in matters touching the benefit of the country" and in which he has "done her majesty good service," according to a document from the Privy Council which supported the awarding of the MA degree, to which some were opposed.

The remainder of Marlowe's career was dedicated primarily to his theatrical endeavors in London; his development as a playwright, including his embrace

and enhancement of the use of blank verse, was a key moment in the larger explosion of drama as a central expression of Elizabethan life. He also maintained some of his contacts and activities within the political world, and in May 1593 he was arrested on a charge of atheism, partly on the basis of a confession by fellow playwright Thomas Kyd, who was tortured and revealed that suspect writings found in his rooms were Marlowe's. Marlowe was granted bail on the condition that he report daily to an officer of the court. On May 30, he died when he was stabbed in the eye at the home of Eleanor Bull in Deptford, where he was meeting with three other men associated with the secret service. Was it murder? The coroner's report says no, but many have wondered in the 400 years since.

Dido, Queen of Carthage: a synopsis

“I am all ablaze with love, like torches of wax tipped with sulphur, like pious incense placed on smoking altar fires.”

Dido to Aeneas
Ovid, *The Heroides VII*

Following the Greek victory at Troy, a few Trojans manage to escape. Among them are Aeneas, son of Venus and a mortal father, Prince Anchises, whose story is told by Virgil in the *Aeneid*. Aeneas and a group of fellow Trojans, including his son Ascanius, journey for six years throughout the Mediterranean before making a landfall at Carthage. The events in Carthage provide the subject matter of Marlowe’s play.



The Queen welcomes Aeneas and his fellow travelers, and Aeneas relates the tale of the fall of Troy. The sympathetic queen seems willing to provide the necessary aid for the repair of the ships so that the travelers may continue their journey. Venus helps her decision along by disguising Cupid as Ascanius to be sure that Dido will fall in love with Aeneas, and thus guarantee her support of his journey—or, alternatively, that she will marry him and make him king of Carthage. When Juno discovers Aeneas’s son and threatens to kill him, the two goddesses collaborate to ensure that Aeneas remains in Carthage. Marlowe’s subplot of the unrequited love of Dido’s sister Anna for Iarbus, King of Gaetulia and suitor to Dido, further complicates the story.

Jupiter, however, sends his messenger Mercury to remind Aeneas of his destiny in Italy, and Aeneas knows he must leave. When Dido learns of his plans, he assures her that he will stay, but she can no longer trust him; she sends his son (actually the disguised Cupid) to the country, and removes the tackle, oars, and sails from the ships so they cannot leave.

The climactic final scenes follow: another messenger reminds Aeneas of his destiny, Aeneas becomes aware of Cupid's intervention in recent events, Iarbus agrees to prepare the ships for departure, and Dido once again confronts Aeneas about his plans to leave.

Dido, Queen of Carthage: production history

According to the first published edition of the play in 1594, a year after Marlowe's death, it was "played by the Children of her Majesty's Chapel." The date of that performance, however, remains lost in history. It was probably sometime during the mid-to-late 1580s.

Some entries in the diary of Philip Henslowe may indicate that the play was performed by The Admiral's Men in 1598.

From that time until the 400th anniversary of Marlowe's birth in 1964, no production record exists. Along with *The Massacre at Paris*, *Dido* is the least performed of Marlowe's plays. Things pick up a bit in the twenty-first century, with productions by the Target Margin Theatre Company (New York, 2001), Shakespeare's Globe (London, 2003), the American Repertory Theatre (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005), a series of site-specific performances by Angels in the Architecture (UK, 2001, 2006, 2008), and a production at the National Theatre (London, 2009). A link to the educational materials prepared for the National Theatre production is included on our Resources page.

Some issues and questions to consider

This is a play about love and passion: how is it represented throughout the play and is it seen as a positive or negative force? Consider these examples:

- Jupiter's lust for Ganymede
- Venus's maternal concerns for Aeneas
- Juno's jealousy
- Iarbus's desire for Dido
- Anna's love for Iarbus
- The nurse's sudden passion for Cupid/Ascanius

How does the relationship of Dido and Aeneas relate to these other manifestations of love and desire? How much of Dido's love is genuine, and how much is created by Cupid's arrow? What are Aeneas's feelings about Dido?

How does Marlowe show the world of the gods interacting with the human world? How would you describe the behavior of the gods?

In Virgil's original story, after Aeneas departs, Dido builds a pyre on which she intends to burn everything related to Aeneas; she then commits suicide with a sword on the pyre. Marlowe has modified this ending to make Dido's death one by fire rather than by sword. Why might he have made such a choice?

While the play is in essence a tragedy, it nonetheless encompasses elements of comedy and burlesque: the opening love scene between Jupiter and Ganymede, the absurdity of the nurse's passion for Cupid/Ascanius, the heaving passion of Anna for Iarbus. What impact do these elements have on the central story line?

Marlowe's personal history and reputation as an atheist and a sexual outsider (the words "homosexual" and "gay" did not exist in the Elizabethan period) made him outspoken on both religious and social-sexual issues. In what ways might his own perspectives be reflected in the play?

Marlowe's use of blank verse creates a powerful and dramatic story, while the acts and absurdity of some of the characters undermines the tale. What impact does this combination have on a reader or audience member? How does it affect your response to the play?

Resources

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Books 1, 2, and 4 include material on which Marlowe drew for the play.

Ovid. *Heroides*. Chapter 7 is "Dido to Aeneas"

Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Aeneas appears in Books 13 and 14, and Dido (very briefly) in 14.

Marlowe Society website for *Dido*:

<http://www.marlowe-society.org/marlowe/work/dido/intro.html>

National Theatre production education pack:

<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/40325/past-productions/resources-to-download.html>

Charles Nicholl. *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*.

David Riggs. *The World of Christopher Marlowe*.

Anthony Burgess. *A Dead Man in Deptford*. A novel about Marlowe.

Ursula K. LeGuin. *Lavinia*. A novel about Aeneas's arrival in Italy and the woman he marries there.

Queen Dido building Carthage and the rise of the Carthaginian Empire . (Soerfm / Public Domain). Queen Dido's Life in Carthage. In time, Carthage prospered and Iarbas sought Dido's hand in marriage. The queen, however, declined as she was still faithful to her late husband and would not marry another man. In one version of the legend, Iarbas would not take no for an answer and threatened to destroy Carthage if the queen persisted in her refusal. As a result, Dido saw no other choice but to commit suicide, either by stabbing herself on a funeral pyre , or by throwing herself onto the pyre's fire.

Dido, queen of Carthage. ACT I. SCENE I. Here the curtains draw : there is discovered JUPITER dandling GANYMEDE upon Ms knee, and MERCURY lying asleep. Jup. O Dido, queen of Carthage. And, therefore, will take pity on his toil, And call both Thetis and Cymodoce, To succour him in this extremity. Enter AENEAS, ASCANIUS, ACHATES, and one or two more. Dido (pronounced Die-doh) is known best as the mythical queen of Carthage who died for love of Aeneas, according to "The Aeneid" of the Roman poet Vergil (Virgil). Dido was the daughter of the king of the Phoenician city-state of Tyre, and her Phoenician name was Elissa, but she was later given the name Dido, meaning "wanderer." Dido was also the name of a Phoenician deity named Astarte.

Who Wrote About Dido? According to Timaeus, Dido founded Carthage in either 814 or 813 BCE. A later source is the first-century historian Josephus whose writings mention an Elissa who founded Carthage during the rule of Menandros of Ephesus. Most people, however, know about the story of Dido from its telling in Vergil's Aeneid.

The Legend. Christopher Marlowe "the man and the mystery" Synopsis of Dido, Queen of Carthage Children of the Chapel Vergil and the conception of The Aeneid Gods and religion in Roman times A biography of the Gods Origins of the Trojan War "The Judgement of Paris Dido and her journey to Carthage A family tree of the Alba Longa A rough timeline "Troy to Marlowe." 1. The National's production. This production of Dido, Queen of Carthage had its premiere at the National's Cottesloe Theatre on 24 March 2009.

Gods Jupiter. . . AlanDavid Ganymede. . . Dido, Queen of Carthage (full title: The Tragedie of Dido Queene of Carthage) is a short play written by the English playwright Christopher Marlowe, with possible contributions by Thomas Nashe. It was probably written between 1587 and 1593, and was first published in 1594. The story focuses on the classical figure of Dido, the Queen of Carthage. It tells an intense dramatic tale of Dido and her fanatical love for Aeneas (induced by Cupid), Aeneas' betrayal of her and her eventual suicide on his