

# “Quod me Nutrit me Destruit”

## Relationships in Marlowe’s *Dido, Queen of Carthage*

At the close of *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, three people lie dead on stage, slain by their own hands. Their deaths are a testimony, perhaps even a sacrifice, to a play which remorselessly probes the nature of man’s relationships, both with his fellow men, and with the divine. Marlowe presents both as inherently dangerous. *Dido* is a play which constantly affirms a link between the creative and destructive processes, and displays the concepts of love and violence to be but different manifestations of the same complex of passions and desires. For the Latin inscription on Marlowe’s portrait<sup>1</sup> which reads: *Quod me nutrit me destruit* - that which nourishes me destroys me - suggests not simply that one is sustained and diminished by the same force, but that the forces themselves of nourishment and destruction are in essence the same.

The opening scene between Jupiter and his servant Ganymede, which is neither minor nor easily forgotten, as H.J. Oliver mistakenly suggests<sup>2</sup>, exists as a fascinating study on the balance of power within a relationship and in many respects presages the key issues of the major relationship of the play, between Dido and Aeneas. Symbolised by the stage direction where, like a ventriloquist with his dummy, Jupiter sits “dandling Ganymede upon his knee”, emphasis is placed upon the idea that the desire to control others is an important, perhaps even *the* important factor in the forming of relationships. However, though the controlling power between the gods resides initially with Jupiter, during the course of the scene a shift takes place: the puppet, as it were, begins to control the master. For Jupiter, though traditionally the greatest of all the gods, diminishes himself with the first words he utters:

*Come, gentle Ganymede, and play with me:  
I love thee well, say Juno what she will.*

**Dido, Queen of Carthage, I.i.1-2**

In declaring love for his servant openly and without the promise of reciprocation, Jupiter makes himself vulnerable to rejection - perhaps not because Ganymede does not love Jupiter, but simply because Jupiter’s announcement gives the servant the freedom *not* to love him. For freedom is empowering, and Jupiter, in making himself dependent upon the love of Ganymede, relinquishes his freedom in direct proportion to the new sense of independence that Ganymede enjoys. Indeed the boy appears to recognise the power of his new status because throughout the scene he refuses to return Jupiter’s pledge of love, preferring to use the promise of it to extract favours from the king of the gods:

<sup>1</sup> The putative portrait of Marlowe is shown in Figure 1, Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> H.J. Oliver (Ed.), *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (Methuen & Co., 1968) - Introduction, p. xli.

*I would have a jewel for mine ear,  
And a fine brooch to put in my hat  
And then I’ll hug you a hundred times.*

**I.i.46-48**

Jupiter, seemingly besotted with the boy, can only rather meekly capitulate to his demands:

*And shalt have, Ganymede, it thou wilt be my  
Love.*

**I.i.49-50**

Marlowe thus presents a rather unsettling view of relationships as inherently diminishing unions. One love in order to control, and yet one ultimately ends by being controlled by that same love. Moreover, in the portrayal of Jupiter as either unaware or unconcerned with his subjugation through his love for Ganymede, Marlowe tells us that the nature of desire, that one wants all the more what one cannot have, which draws Jupiter to lust for Ganymede all the more as the servant refuses to return his pledge of love, means that Jupiter is attracted by that which diminishes him. Indeed the more weakened Jupiter becomes by Ganymede, the more he is attracted by him.

The notion that relationships are threatening to personal freedom is further explored in the relationship of Aeneas and Dido. When Aeneas first arrives in Carthage, Dido is able to control him because at this time he has no sense of his own identity. Having associated himself so closely with the city of Troy, its destruction leaves him asking:

*Sometime I was a Trojan, mighty Queen,  
But Troy is not. What shall I say I am?*

**I.i.75-76**

Marlowe presents Aeneas not as the classical hero of Virgil, but rather unsympathetically as a helpless fool. Aeneas’ crime is the subordination of his own identity in deference to the national identity of Troy. Aeneas is not recognised by his followers when they meet in Carthage because the destruction of Troy has left a void in Aeneas himself. Significantly, his fellow Trojans only realise that the man who stands before them is their leader when Achates calls Aeneas by name. Thus Aeneas initially, as throughout the entire play, is unable to define himself as he is continually subjugated by his relationships, and is therefore defined by those around him. Aeneas has no idea who he is: he is Aeneas the Trojan Prince only when his followers identify him as such; he is Dido’s bauble when she commands him to be so, and he is the founder of Rome and the agent of the gods when he is reminded of his duty by Hermes.

Aeneas’ complex and volatile relationship with Dido sees the Trojan first emerge as the feminised plaything of the Carthaginian Queen. He is told what

to wear and where to sit at her banquet table. Though he comes to life when he recounts his tale of the fall of Troy, he speaks only at the command of Dido, like a child performing a party-piece, or a dog a trick for the amusement of its master. However, just as the onset of love shifts the power in the relationship of Jupiter and Ganymede, so do we register a change in Dido after she reluctantly reveals her feelings for Aeneas. Indeed, as we observe Dido in the aftermath of Cupid’s intervention, unwilling openly to declare her love for Aeneas, it is almost as if she is aware of the diminishing power of love that Marlowe shows acting upon Jupiter. Thus she denies sending for him, after Aeneas is summoned at her command, for to admit that she needs his presence would empower Aeneas with the freedom to accept or reject her invitation. Moreover, when Dido speaks of loving another, she does so in terms of giving up her freedom:

*I am free from all;  
And yet, God knows, entangled unto one.*

**III.i.152-153**

Significantly, when she at last declares her feelings for Aeneas, albeit in a rather convoluted and oblique manner, the pair find themselves in the claustrophobic surroundings of a cave. Trapped physically as well as emotionally, she remarks:

*We are loose:  
And yet I am not free.*

**III.iv.4-5**

Freedom, for Dido, equates to her independence - literally not being dependent upon another. By falling in love with Aeneas, she becomes dependent on his presence in her life and therefore on his remaining in Carthage. Yet Marlowe refuses the opportunity to empower Aeneas in the way he does Ganymede, and the hapless Trojan simply fails to appreciate the power he has over Dido, as Dido understands the weakness of her own position. The queen is therefore able, with some skill, to extract a pledge of love from Aeneas just as she reveals her love for him. Further, any power which Aeneas gains through Dido’s love he immediately relinquishes through his devotion to the gods, empowering them to the detriment of himself. Aeneas remains an emasculated figure, and the power struggle of his relationship with Dido takes place between Dido and the gods, who pull him in separate directions, with Aeneas himself appearing as a mere pawn.

For the same struggle that exists in the temporal relationships of the play, also exists in man’s relationship with the gods. When Dido says of Aeneas,

*If he forsake me not, I never die,  
For in his looks I see eternity,  
And he’ll make me immortal with a kiss*

**IV.iv.121-123**

she alludes to a notion which pervades this play: that immortality is something which one gains through the love and devotion of another. As we have already seen above that Marlowe presents love in terms of the desire to control, it is perhaps more accurate to suggest that it is through the complete subjugation of another that one gains god-like status. The gods, who sit at the start of the play on Mount Olympus, have no power except that which mortal man bestows upon them through worship and adoration. Man therefore empowers the gods by the same means that Jupiter empowers Ganymede, by humbling himself before them, and making himself dependent upon them. Marlowe therefore suggests that the gods’ exalted position, and perhaps even their very existence, is more precarious than one might imagine, dependent as it is on mortal man’s subservience. Indeed, Jupiter himself appears to understand the contingent nature of his divinity when he is roused from frolicking with Ganymede only when Venus portrays Aeneas as heroically daring (and it is significant that this is the only time in the play when Marlowe’s Trojan Prince appears in line with the heroic Aeneas of Virgil’s original poem) to travel through a storm without the assistance, and even in spite of the gods:

*...my Aeneas wanders on the seas,  
And rests a prey to every billow’s pride.  
Juno, false Juno, in her chariot’s pomp,  
Drawn through the heavens by steeds of Borea’s brood,  
Made Hebe to direct her airy wheels  
Into the windy country of the clouds,  
Where, finding Aeolus entrenched with storms  
And guarded with a thousand grisly ghosts,  
She humbly did beseech him for our bane,  
And charged him drown my son with all his train.*

**I.i.52-61**

Jupiter therefore assists Aeneas precisely because Aeneas does *not* seek his help. Such is the nature of desire, that Jupiter wants Ganymede’s pledge of love all the more because it is not forthcoming, and he wants Aeneas to know his hand at work in saving his life so that Aeneas’ life will become dependent upon his goodwill, simply because Aeneas at this stage has not made himself vulnerable before the gods in prayer requesting his own safety. The doomsday scenario for Jupiter is when heroic men cease to worship him, showing the world that they can survive without him, for it is only by this means that he gains existence. Therefore it is interesting that Venus prefers her son to die, instead of hoping that Aeneas will reach land by his own heroism, rather than have him know that Jupiter has no power to intervene:

*...die, Aeneas, in thine innocence,  
Since that religion hath no recompense.*

**I.i.79-81**

This demonstrates that Venus understands, as Jupiter does, that the gods must, by all means possible, seek to make the mortal world appear dependent

upon their favour, in order to maintain their divine status. The gods thus become the weak partners in the relationship with mortal man, their existence contingent on man’s devotion - that they are able to retain their superior position is only due to man remaining unaware of his power.

Certainly Marlowe portrays those who defer to the god’s authority as rather enfeebled characters. Iarbas, for example, who diminishes himself primarily by his unrequited love for Dido, appears as an utterly emasculated figure, unable to decide even from whom to seek redress for his predicament:

*What shall I do, thus wronged with distain?  
Revenge me on Aeneas or on her?*

**III.iii.69-70**

When Iarbas prays to *Eternal Jove* he does so in such grovelling terms that he further weakens himself by yielding the power of revenge to god. Iarbas’ prayers are not answered because he is not heroic and powerful, and he does not threaten to seek vengeance without consulting Jupiter. Jupiter knows that souls like Iarbas have made themselves dependent upon him, and he thus has no desire, or need, to assist them as he does Aeneas at the start of the play. Yet Iarbas’ also makes the fundamental mistake of simply appealing to the wrong god.

*Now, if thou be’st a pitying god of power,  
On whom compassion ever waits,  
Redress these wrongs and warn him to his ships,  
That now afflicts me with his flattering eyes.*

**IV.ii.19-22**

Marlowe’s god is not a god of compassion, nor does he pity his subjects. Marlowe’s god is the Machiavellian Prince who is interested in his subjects only as far as they help maintain his power over them. He operates without the constraints of morality, loving only to control, and controlling only as a means by which to maintain his power by making himself appear necessary to the existence of the world. His creations and destructions spring also from a common desire to maintain this power. However, Marlowe typically allows no sympathy for Iarbas, presenting him as a feeble fool, an idiot who by his own stupidity maintains Jupiter’s power, and thus, however unwittingly, is implicated in the god’s actions.

This rather disturbing notion of the union of the forces of creation and destruction under a common desire for control prevails in Jupiter and indeed throughout the play where love and violence appear so closely related that they merge into a single complex. Jupiter’s desire to control Ganymede is an example of this where Jupiter measures his devotion to his servant by the acts of brutality he would commit in order to win the boy’s love:

*From Juno’s bird I’ll pluck her spotted pride,  
To make thee fans wherewith to cool thy face;*

*And Venus’ swans shall shed their silver down,  
To sweeten out the slumbers of thy bed;  
Hermes no more shall show the world his wings,  
If that thy fancy in his feathers dwell,  
But, as this one, I’ll tear them all from him,  
Do thou but say, ‘their colour pleaseth me.*

**I.i.34-41**

Yet once again, Marlowe shows Jupiter being diminished by the very force he imagines empowers him. Jupiter believes that this statement of his capacity for violence will make him appear to Ganymede as a great and powerful king, and yet the destruction of his messenger Hermes, the instrument with which he wields his power over Aeneas, would in fact have a debilitating effect upon his command. For Marlowe, love springs from the same desire as violence. Since the nature of desire must draw people into inherently debilitating relationships, one must ultimately end by destroying oneself. It is this realisation that Dido reaches in the final passages of the play when she says:

*Ay, I must be the murderer of myself.*

**V.i.270**

Throughout the entirety of the play, Marlowe constantly returns to this idea: that one is the agent of one’s own destruction. Thus we see Aeneas at one point with the plans by which he means to reconstruct a greater and more glorious Carthage, the same Carthage that will come to be the virulent enemy of Rome in the centuries to come. Marlowe tells us that the forces themselves of creation and destruction derive from the same source and symbolises this in Aeneas’ sword which Dido attempts to destroy on the pyre, and of which she claims:

*thy crime is worse than his.*

**V.i.297**

The sword is at the same time an instrument of war, of death and destruction, and yet also a means by which to swear love and pledge allegiance. It unites and holds together in its blade without contradiction the two seemingly diametrically opposed forces of love and violence, of creation and destruction.

In Dido’s suicide we also see the unification of these two forces. By destroying herself Dido relinquishes control over her own life, and yields the power of vengeance to the gods, and yet at the same time, through her own death, she understands that she can create a legend for herself and Aeneas which will live on:

*Now, Dido, with these relics burn thyself,  
And make Aeneas famous throughout the world  
For perjury and slaughter of a queen*

...



*And now, ye gods that guide the starry frame*

...

*Grant, though the traitors land in Italy,  
They may be still tormented with unrest,  
And from mine ashes let a conqueror rise,  
That may revenge this treason to a queen.*

**V.i.292-307**

When Aeneas leaves Dido, her passions and desires no longer find a medium to manifest themselves as a creative force. Without this outlet she appears trapped in idle fantasies (V.i.262), dreaming that Aeneas will return or that she will reach him by some mythological device. Dido is ensnared by an irresolvable set of circumstances from which there is no escape:

*Nothing can bear me to him but a ship,  
And he hath all my fleet.*

**V.i.266-267**

The only vent for her passions comes through the destruction of herself:

*What shall I do,  
But die in fury of this oversight.*

**V.i.267-268**

The only power she has left is the power to destroy herself, and it is through this destruction that she can again create. It is for this reason - the creative power of her own destruction - that Dido embraces death. In translation her final words read: *Thus, thus! I go to the dark, go gladly.*

One of the major additions Marlowe makes to his Virgilian source, the three-fold suicide of the final, climactic scene, has often been criticised for “weakening rather than heightening the tragedy”<sup>3</sup>, and even “calling for parody”<sup>4</sup>. Though this could suggest a deficiency in the criticism rather than the play itself, it is initially surprising given the genuine tragedy of Dido’s suicide that the playwright should risk undoing the emotional and dramatic effect of the queen’s death with the almost comic manner in which the deaths of Iarbas and Anna follow. For as the philosopher René Girard states: “between comedy and tragedy, there is only the sincerity of the sacrifice.”<sup>5</sup>

By piling bodies on the stage in a manner which would jar with an Elizabethan audience familiar with Virgil’s original poem, Marlowe jeopardises the sincerity of his entire play. So why does he take such a chance? Perhaps the answer lies in the moments in the final scene of greatest dramatic tension: when Aeneas leaves Dido for Italy, and when Dido casts herself into the pyre. At

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid - p.xxxvi

<sup>4</sup> J.B. Steane, *Marlowe, A Critical Study* (Cambridge University Press, 1964) - p.48.

<sup>5</sup> René Girard, *Shakespeare and the Fires of Envy* (A Lecture at Glasgow University, October 2000).

these crucial moments, it is significant that Marlowe should emphasise the derivative nature of the play by yielding authorship of the character’s words in deference to Virgil’s original text. Thus Dido’s dying words are Virgil’s, not Marlowe’s:

*Sic, sic iuvat sub umbras.*

**V.i.313**

In highlighting his source, Marlowe gives the impression of being bound by Virgil’s poem, in the same way that Dido is trapped by her situation. Dido sees the destruction of herself as a liberation from her circumstances, and as a vent for her creative and possessive desires. Similarly, Marlowe’s addition of the deaths of Iarbas and Anna represent not simply the destruction of the play - though their demise, in addition to the gods’ return to Mount Olympus, and Aeneas and the other Trojans departure for Italy, certainly leaves the play devoid of a character - but also emphasises Marlowe freeing himself from the constraints of his source by destroying Virgil’s power over the play by the jarring nature of the final deaths.

For Marlowe as for his character Dido, the desire to create is the same as the desire to destroy, in that they both spring from a desire to control. If Dido’s dream is to control Aeneas, for Marlowe it is the power to control his play. Marlowe, in this final scene, becomes the classical heroic figure so conspicuously absent from this drama, defying the authority of a great master of the past, destroying Virgil’s composition in order to create a new play and, as *Dido* is often considered to be Marlowe’s first dramatic work, himself as a playwright.

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## Appendix A: Putative Portrait of Marlowe



**Figure 1 - Putative Portrait of Christopher Marlowe**

The portrait believed to be of Christopher Marlowe, was found at Corpus Christi College, where he studied, and is inscribed (in the top left hand corner) with his age and his motto:

ANNO DNI ÆTATIS SVÆ 21  
1585  
QVOD ME NUTRIT  
ME DESTRUIT