The Sword of Aeneas: The Intertextuality of *Heroides* 7 and the *Aeneid*

Arma virumque cano, "Arms I sing — and a man" (Vergil, *Aeneid* 1.1), the *Aeneid* of Vergil begins. With the very first word of the epic, Vergil tells his audience that this is a story of weapons and, even more specifically than that, of swords. It is also a story of a man, of Aeneas, and his journey to found Rome. Aeneas is understood in close relation with the tools of war-making. Joseph Farrell, for instance, has asserted that the thematic words which begin the epic are a *hysteron proteron* that detail how the *Aeneid* has one half which is the story of an Odyssean man's wanderings and another half that is an Iliadic tale of arms.[1] However, there is another reading of the opening lines that suggests the entire epic is a story of arms and their effect on the man. In both of these readings, Book 4 is a key component of the argument since the sword of Aeneas is the means by which Dido, the Queen of Carthage, kills herself. Likewise, these readings discuss Dido's connection to Turnus and the later events of the epic because they can be read as united in their positions as "enemies" slain by the sword of Aeneas. Ovid's *Heroides* 7, the letter from Dido to Aeneas, engages with this discourse on the sword in a measured, conscious way. Aware that his readers would have read Vergil's recently composed epic, Ovid makes active intertextual decisions to keep or break with the narrative of Dido's doomed

[1] Joseph Farrell, *Juno's Aeneid: A Battle for Heroic Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 41.

love affair with Aeneas.[2] Thus, it is worth noting how he treats the symbol of Aeneas' sword and what phrases, themes, and ideas from the *Aeneid* are present within Ovid's version. As such, this paper will focus on the symbolism of the sword, the way the sword interacts with Dido (in terms of both the *Heroides* and the *Aeneid*, with particular focus on how Ovid uses elegy to reshape the epic narrative), and finally, how Turnus' connection to Dido brings the sword's journey to an apotheosis in the *Aeneid* and helps Dido to craft an even more scathing indictment of Aeneas' actions. Each of these points will contribute to an overall argument that each sword wielded by Aeneas is an expression of his identity, and, moreover, how he enacts violence in his relationships with characters like Dido and Turnus. This symbolism deepens even more in the *Heroides* as Ovid shifts the focus from an epic tale to a brutal lover's recrimination.

To begin, the sword is a symbol unto itself. Aeneas is a Trojan warrior; his sword is part of who he is. In Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, it is clear that the sword is a facet of Aeneas' identity, not least because there are actually two swords at play. One is the original Trojan one that he carried to Carthage, and the other is one that Dido gifted him. These swords go on their own parallel journey throughout the book. To start, Mercury notes Aeneas' Dido-gifted "sword [which] was enstarred with yellow jasper" (Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.295) when he admonishes the hero for becoming overly involved with the queen and thus not pursuing his destiny. So, Aeneas decides to leave and uses the sword to cut the cables tethering the Trojan refugees to Carthage (Vergil,

[2] Paul Murgatroyd, Bridget Reeves, and Sara Parker, *Ovid's Heroides: A New Translation and Critical Essays* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 76.

Aeneid 4.675-7). This act is symbolic of how Aeneas and Dido's relationship is severed.[3] However, it should also be noted that it is heavily implied that the sword which Aeneas cuts the cables with and thus takes to use throughout the epic is the jasper-studded one. He leaves his original "Trojan sword" (Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.751) with Dido, and this is the one which she in turn uses to kill herself. It is possible to infer several things from this transference of swords: Dido now holds something of Aeneas' Trojan identity, Aeneas will now carry a reminder of the queen wherever he goes, and Dido kills herself with a powerful remnant of Aeneas' personal Trojanness. The two engage in a trading of identity as much as they do swords: their relationship has a profound effect on what they become when they part and, as a result, on the epic itself.

The sword's symbolism runs even deeper than the interactions between Dido and Aeneas, though. Michael C.J. Putnam identifies the use of the sword with Aeneas' journey towards becoming more like the Greeks who destroyed Troy. In the later books, particularly 10 and 12, Aeneas exhibits Achillean rage, resulting in the final battle between Aeneas and Turnus which reads similarly to Achilles' pursuit of Hector.[4] He also works his way towards becoming a Pyrrhus in his own right. The son of Achilles took the life of Priam, the Trojan king, as Aeneas tells Dido: "He dragged Priam, trembling and slipping / In his son's blood, up to the altar. Winding / His left hand in the old man's hair, with his right / He lifted his flashing sword and

[3] R.G. Basto, "The Swords of Aeneid 4," *The American Journal of Philology* 105, no. 3 (1984), 333–38: 334.
[4] Michael C.J. Putnam, *The Humanness of Heroes: Studies in the Conclusion of Virgil's Aeneid*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 92.

buried it / Up to its hilt in his side" (Vergil, *Aeneid* 2.642-6). Putnam analyzes the Pyrrhus-Priam episode in relation to Aeneas and finds that the Trojan hero is presented many opportunities to commit similar violence throughout the epic: in Book 2, he nearly strikes a cowering Helen; in Book 4, he presents his Trojan sword to Dido, which will then be buried in *her* side; in Book 10, he cuts down the suppliant Magus and proud Mezentius; in Book 12, he reenacts Pyrrhus' actions by slaying the weakened Turnus.[5] In each of these situations, Aeneas uses his sword, whether Trojan or Carthaginian in origin, to kill (or, in Helen's case, nearly kill). As such, the sword carries the suggestion of violence that is city-razing and self-destructive. It sits at the epicenter of Aeneas' harmful heroic identity.

Dido definitely bears that harm and makes that especially known in Ovid's rendition of her in *Heroides* 7. Ovid uses elegiac conventions to deepen and, in some cases, alter the narrative of Dido as presented in the *Aeneid*. Such tactics echo how he, throughout his works, perceives there to be a battle between epic and love elegy.[6] He outlines this genre conflict in the opening of *Amores* and brings it to full fruition in the elegiac treatments of various epic heroines that feature in the *Heroides*.[7] There is "cheek" in how the, at this time, young Ovid chooses to explore the grand, nationally important Vergilian narrative of Dido in *Heroides* 7,[8] but this

[5] Putnam, *The Humanness*, 61.
[6] D.W.T. Vessey, "Elegy Eternal: Ovid, 'Amores', I. 15," *Latomus* 40, no. 3 (1981), 607–17: 610.
[7] Christina Tsaknaki, *Ovid's Heroides: A Selection*, (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 47.
[8] Paul Murgatroyd, Bridget Reeves, and Sarah Parker, *A New Translation and Critical Essays*, 85.

audaciousness does not preclude Ovid from having sincere and serious thoughts on the story. It simply allows him to contrive the story in a different way, wherein he can focus on the internal character of Dido more. Here, she has the capacity to be something other than an epic figure. H. Akbar Khan notes that "in Ovid we have an epitaph which concerns itself with the woman rather than the queen."[9] As such, she can relate her feelings in a way that her Vergilian counterpart cannot. She dissects her relationship with Aeneas as detailed in Book 4 using elegiac language that allows her to truly bear out her grievances. For instance, she says, "Pardon my crime: I wasn't deceived by someone unworthy, / thanks to him that lapse of mine is not something hateful" (Ovid, *Heroides* 7.105-6). With these words, Dido does not allow pious Aeneas to dodge blame for their affair. He, even though he is a "worthy" hero, was as much part of it as she was. Ovid uses the lover's legalistic reproach, a common feature of love elegy, to facilitate this indictment. Christina Tsaknaki's commentary on the *Heroides* affirms this, stating that "the Ovidian Dido makes Aeneas more directly responsible for her inevitable death, whether at her hands or those of her enemies…"[10] At the center of this responsibility are the swords the two characters trade, since they are both a symbolic and physical expression of the harm the two bear from each other.

As a symbol, the sword is a good example of how Ovid's conscious, cheeky intertextuality refracts the epic through an elegiac lens. A common elegiac trope is love as war (*militia*

[9] H. Akbar Khan, "Dido and the Sword of Aeneas," *Classical Philology* 63, no. 4 (1968), 283–85: 285.
[10] Tsaknaki, *A Selection*, 73.

amoris).[11] Dido definitely participates in this trope throughout *Heroides* 7. She describes Aeneas as a warrior in Cupid's camp, *frater amor castris militet ille tuis* (Ovid, *Heroides* 7.31-2). She notes how her suitors turned to war to vie for her affections*, bellis peregrina et femina temptor… mille procis placui, qui me coiere querentes* (Ovid, *Heroides* 7.121-4). Finally, she states that her heart has been "pierced," *feriuntur*, by "the wound of savage love," *saevi vulnus amoris*, and is now pierced again by Aeneas' sword, the *telo* (Ovid, *Heroides* 7.189-90). However, this couching of love in terms of battle is not limited to the *Heroides*' elegy alone; the *Aeneid* uses this metaphor also. Putnam points out that "the metaphoric lethal arrow will metamorphose, at the book's end, into the abandoning lover's sword, the means by which the Carthaginian queen now deals herself the final deadly blow."[12] For Dido, love is a violence. It has harmed her.

When Dido finishes her letter to Aeneas, it is poignant that in her lap is the sword that he left behind. In her position, wherein she is decrying her lover for her transgressions, another tragic woman would likely throw herself down on a marital couch and cry into it.[13] Indeed, that is what the Vergilian Dido does when she climbs the pyre and takes up Aeneas' sword to kill herself (Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.764 and 4.789-71). However, the Ovidian Dido instead states that "I'm writing with your Trojan sword here in my lap, / and tears roll down my cheeks onto the drawn sword, / which will soon be soaked with blood instead of

[11] Leslie Cahoon, "The Bed as Battlefield: Erotic Conquest and Military Metaphor in Ovid's Amores," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 118 (1988), 293–307: 293.
[12] Putnam, *The Humanness*, 78.
[13] Khan, "Dido and the Sword," 284.

tears" (Ovid, *Heroides* 7.184-6).[14] The receptacle of her agony is the sword, itself a symbol of both Aeneas and his violence. It is clear that the swords are the same in the *Heroides* and *Aeneid* because Ovid uses *ensis* for sword, a word that Vergil also uses.[15] This, Aeneas,' sword is what Dido presses her love into, this figure of warfare. Ovid takes a convention of elegy (love as warfare) and combines it with the connotations of love as a destructive force that are already present in the epic language of the *Aeneid*. In this way, he crafts a Dido who is very explicit about the havoc wreaked on her by her love for Aeneas and the consequences of his actions.

Such explicitness should be familiar to a reader of love elegy. When she condemns and laments the actions of her lover, Dido is acting like a typical elegiac heroine in the *Heroides*.[16] However, this condemnation is not cheap, especially when the sword enters the picture. In her letter, Dido leaves us, and the never-to-read-it Aeneas, with these final parting words, "Aeneas provided her reason for dying and the sword;/ Dido's own hand struck the fatal blow" (Ovid, *Heroides* 7.195-6). These words are incredibly dynamic. For one, they succinctly demonstrate the fault that Aeneas bears for Dido's death even though he did not literally kill her. They also nod to the last fatal blow by the

[14] Ovid, *Heroides* 7.184-6: Scribimus, et gremio Troicus ensis adest,/ Perque genas lacrimae strictum labuntur in ensem,/ Qui iam pro lacrimis sanguine tinctus erit.
[15] For context, *ensis* is used three times in *Heroides* 7 and five times in *Aeneid* 4. The next most commonly used word for the sword is *telum*, a noun which could mean weapon *or* sword; it is used twice by Ovid and four times by Vergil. For Ovid, the decision to use these words could be the result of either unconscious association or active choice, but the fact remains: even the vocabulary ties these texts together.
[16] Paul Allen Miller, "The Parodic Sublime: Ovid's Reception of Virgil in Heroides 7," *Materiali e Discussioni per l'analisi Dei Testi Classici*, no. 52 (2004), 57–72: 58.

sword in the *Aeneid*, the one to Turnus, which Aeneas *does* perform himself. At the end of the epic, after a long journey, a bloody war, and the deaths of many (Dido at the forefront of the reader's mind always), the final confrontation between Turnus and Aeneas is depicted. Turnus, defeated, goes to his knees in supplication; Aeneas pauses, thinking over the Rutulian's offer of peace, but suddenly catches sight of murdered Pallas' sword-belt on Turnus' shoulder. Then, "seething with rage, Aeneas/ Buried his sword in Turnus' chest. The man's limbs/ Went limp and cold, and with a moan/ His soul fled resentfully down to the shades" (Vergil, *Aeneid* 12.1154-7). The imagery of this moment alone recalls Dido; when she died, "all the body's warmth/ Ebbed away, and Dido's life withdrew into the winds" (Vergil, *Aeneid* 4.821-2), but it is not only the onset of cold and the fleeing of the spirit that unites Dido and Turnus. They are both the primary obstacles to Aeneas — and therefore his Roman destiny — during their respective halves of the poem, and both die as a direct result of Aeneas' actions. What's more, they suffer the blows of his swords, his two identities: Dido by the original "Trojan" sword, the Odyssean wanderer called to destiny, and Turnus by the jasper-studded sword, the Dido-affected Aeneas which has accepted the call to destiny and its implication of violence. The sword, by literally wounding them, seals the symbolism of their deaths and its impact on Aeneas' narrative arc.

Beyond the circumstantial similarity in the events of their stories, Turnus is very much a reincarnation of Dido, particularly in his final moments. They each start their respective death books described as wounded creatures: Dido a

deer and Turnus a lion.[17] By the end of the books, the sword thrust of Aeneas makes the figurative, emotional wounds of both characters physical, by his hand or not.[18] Therefore, when the Ovidian Dido tells Aeneas, "How well this gift of yours fits with my doom!" (Ovid, *Heroides* 7.187), she references both how she can use the sword to commit suicide and the overall importance of the sword as the dealer of doom in the story. It brings a brutal end to Dido and Turnus as well as many others in the battles of the *Aeneid*'s second half. It makes the emotional, elegiacally-inclined wounds from Aeneas' actions literal, death-giving ones. By finishing Dido's letter with an accusatory acknowledgment of the sword's power, Ovid mirrors the *Aeneid*'s brutal, violent ending. In doing so, he delivers the final blow that truly transforms love into a weapon of destruction. While love as war may be a common theme of Roman love elegy, *Heroides* 7 uses the familiarity of its readers with the *Aeneid* to give that transformation epic weight. In doing so, Ovid also gives Dido's anger at Aeneas weightiness. Her indictment of his actions is not unwarranted or unearned; instead, the Ovidian Dido can see the coming events of the *Aeneid* perhaps more clearly than anyone else in the epic. Aeneas provided the reason for Dido's death and the means by which to do it, the sword, but he will do the same to many more in the epic, including and especially the Dido-aligned Turnus. *Heroides* 7 gives Dido the sword and the mouthpiece by which to make this fact of Aeneas' destiny clear to the audience.

This discussion sought to illuminate how Ovid augments the Vergilian Dido in *Heroides* 7 and how the sword is at the

[17] Putnam, *The Humanness*, 108-9.
[18] Putnam, *The Humanness*, 109.

center of that intertextual conversation. It has discussed the ways in which the sword is a component of Aeneas' identity in terms of his relationship both with Dido and with violence. It touched on the mechanics of elegy which allow Ovid to expand and contract the *Aeneid*'s narrative, particularly the trope of love as warfare. Finally, it explained the connection of Dido and Turnus that, upon close reading, lends a profound weight to *Heroides* 7's ending and Dido's final indictment of Aeneas. The intertextuality of these texts makes it evident that the *arma* of the *Aeneid* is not confined to the second half alone; the sword of Aeneas spans the entire epic and has a profound impact on Dido's story. It becomes the figure of her love, the violence done to her, and the vanishing solidity of Aeneas' Trojan self all in one. This thing, the doer of destruction, is the endpoint of their love, and that fact haunts the *Aeneid*. For his part, Ovid deepens the already profound pathos of Dido's decision to kill herself with this symbol by infusing condemnation and tears into the sword itself.

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