Dido in Oxford
William Gager's Ovidian Play in Elizabethan England

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Abstract
Dido's journey from ancient Rome to Elizabethan England was long and multifaceted. Virgil himself, in his *Aeneid*, drew upon the historical Dido to shape his own fictional queen, who tragically fell in love with Aeneas, Rome's pious hero. The contradictions resulting from Virgil's epic, however, were first challenged by Ovid's "counter-epic", the *Heroides*, where a heart-broken Dido resentfully curses an "impious" Aeneas for abandoning her. The adherence to either of these two versions would characterise all medieval and early modern refashionings of this tale. This resulted in a huge and varied amount of material for all the English poets and playwrights who looked back at classical Rome and its myths and legends for inspiration during the Renaissance. In this paper, one of the least studied Renaissance versions will be discussed: William Gager's *Dido*, an academic play written in Latin for the visit of the Polish *voivode* Alasco to Oxford in 1583. After briefly delineating an outline of English Renaissance academic drama, the play's multiple references to its contemporary historical context, and to Elizabeth I in particular, will be highlighted. Despite its undeniable adherence to the Virgilian epic, moreover, Gager's *Dido* will be shown to share something of the demystifying spirit that informs Ovid's alternative version.

Key-words: Dido, William Gager, Ovid.

1. William Gager and English academic drama

Oxford, June 1583. The Polish Palatine Count Albertus Alasco enjoyed sumptuous welcome celebrations organised by the authorities of Oxford University. Scarcely a month before, a peremptory letter from Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester and Chancellor of the University, had reached the Vice-Chancellor, Mr Howsone. The Queen – it read – bid the University to organise adequate entertainments for the Palatine Count, who would be

coming to visit on 10 June. Despite such short notice, according to contemporary documents, everything was perfectly arranged and no expense was spared: there were "fire works", "musicians" and "poetries", as well as "scholerlie exercises and courtlie fare" and "verie rich and gorgeous" presents for the several distinguished guests, including the French ambassador Michel de Castelnau and the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno[1]. For the occasion, William Gager, a member of Christ Church College and one of the most talented Latin playwrights of the time, staged the comedy *Rivales*, now lost, and what was remembered as "a verie stately tragedie", *Dido*. If records must be credited, the staging of this play, with its striking special effects, fitted the lavish context of Alasco's visit perfectly:

> [Alasco] was personally present with his traine […] at the setting out of a verie stately tragedie named Dido, wherein the queens banket […] was liuelie described in a marchpaine patterne, there was also a goodlie sight of hunters with full crie of kennel of hounds, Mercurie and Iris descending from and to an high place, the tempest wherein it hailed small confects, rained rosewater, and snew an artificiall kind of snow, all strange, maruellous, and abundant. (Sutton 1994: 242)

Apart from this elaborate and awe-inducing staging, the choice of such a topic was hardly a novelty. During the sixteenth century, classical, and specifically Latin, culture and mythology had indeed become the privileged sources for many works, which contributed to the flourishing of a lively academic drama in England (Bradner 1957; Tilg 2015; Grund 2015).

Since F.S. Boas's first thorough study on the topic, the critics' attention to the Neo-Latin drama of the English Renaissance has considerably increased (Boas 1914; Binns 2002; Knight and Tilg 2015). Despite the diversity of its outcomes – comprising both didactically dull adaptations of classical sources and original refashionings of the same – the contribution given by academic drama to the transition from medieval interludes to the fortunate season of the Elizabethan

[1] Raphael Holinshed's account on Alasco's visit can be found in Sutton (1994: 241-2). On the relevance of Giordano Bruno's staying in England for the development of his philosophical thought, see, among many others, Ciliberto and Mann (1997).

drama of the second half of the sixteenth century is nowadays widely acknowledged. As Tucker Brooke put it, by encouraging the circulation of ideas and materials from the classical and medieval past, "it was the Latin plays of England that saved the day for the theatre and, so to speak, kept a door open for Marlowe and Shakespeare" (Brooke 1946: 234). Such educated drama, along with a wide range of other works written in Latin, thrived thanks to the spreading of continental humanism (Binns 2002: 186-96). Following the well-known doctrine *docere et delectare*, in the cultural centres of Cambridge and Oxford a growing interest for drama led to the composition and staging of several interesting plays. Some of these actually stand out for their skilfully controlled form and the thought-out staging. Also, as opposed to the plays performed on the London stages, these were generally considered more respectable, not only because they were written in Latin – and thus only accessible to a selected audience – but also because they became a useful education tool for students (Greenwood 1964; Binns 1990: 120-40). As a matter of fact, when a heated controversy on the legitimacy of academic drama broke out in Oxford in 1592, William Gager himself replied in a letter to John Rainolds's fierce attacks by defending these very aspects:

> We […] doe it to recreate owre selves, owre House, and the better parte of the Vniversytye, with some learned Poeme or other; to practise owre own style eyther in prose or verse; to be well acquaynted with Seneca or Plautus; honestly to embowlden our yuthe; to trye their voyces, and confirme their memoryes; to frame their speech; to conforme them to convenient action. (qtd in Young 1916: 614)

The acceptability of these plays was also proved by another significant fact: performed every time the Queen visited the two universities, they had always received much appreciation from Elizabeth I (Brooke 1946: 234; Robertson 1969). As Greenwood too acknowledges, far from being mere "jeux d'esprit", these plays were carefully arranged and, in order to be appreciated and understood to their full potential, they should be seen on stage before being judged (Greenwood 1964: 311). While Cambridge came to be known especially for its witty comedies, it was in the comparatively wealthier Oxford that some of the best tragedies in Latin were

produced (Knight 2015: 233-48). For this, William Gager himself must be acknowledged.

Educated in the classics at Winchester College and Doctor of Civil Law at Christ Church College, Oxford, Gager found in the university a stimulating context for his poetical and dramatic creativity (Binns 2004). His preciously preserved notebook actually reveals the steadfast artistic evolution and the gradual development of what Dana F. Sutton (1994: x) identifies as Gager's distinguishing features:

> intense verve and energy, considerable gifts for characterization, a genuine sense of theatre and of what can and should be done on the stage [...], a willingness to cater to popular taste by importing elements from vernacular theatre, by providing plenty of visual spectacle, and by appealing to patriotic sentiment. Gager was also equipped with [...] a lively sense of humour.

Well beyond a mere matter of dramatising classical sources building on Seneca's example, therefore, Gager demonstrated that he was perfectly aware of the powerful energy animating the plays staged in the public theatres in London and managed to infuse some of that revitalising power in his main works, such as *Meleager* or *Dido*. Thus, as Brooke wrote, he "made the Senecan vehicle convey a kind of dramatic entertainment that is essentially Elizabethan" (Brooke 1946: 236). Unsurprisingly, then, Gager would be the one involved in the harsh controversy over the morality of academic drama by the eminent theologian John Rainolds. Supported by his colleague and friend Alberico Gentili, he would repeatedly defend the usefulness and importance of academic plays from the relentless attacks carried out by the strictly Puritan Rainolds (Binns 1990; Ragni 2016). Controversies such as this are not only the perfect example of how important it was to control a powerful means of communication and education such as drama, but also to understand the often political implications hidden below the sophisticated surface of such a literary *querelle* (Spinucci 1973; Barish 1981; Binns 1990: 120-40). Far from being pedantic adaptations of the classics, even an apparently disengaged tragedy such as *Dido* can be shown to mirror the precarious political context of Elizabethan England.

2. Gager's *Dido* between Virgil and Elizabeth I

From the very beginning, Dido's journey from ancient Rome to Elizabethan England was long and multifaceted, just as multifaceted as the shaping of the character of this legendary queen had been. Virgil himself, in his *Aeneid*, drew upon the historical Dido to shape his own fictional queen, who tragically fell in love with Aeneas, Rome's pious hero (Heinze 1915; Horsfall 1990: 127-44). The contradictions resulting from Virgil's epic, however, were first challenged by Ovid's counter-epic, the *Heroides*, where a heart-broken Dido resentfully curses Aeneas for abandoning her. It is here that a very elegiac queen repeatedly blames the Latin hero's impiety for the first time, thus giving voice to what has been called the other, pessimistic voice of Virgil's epic[2]. The adherence to either of these two versions would characterise all later recastings of this tale, from Dante and Petrarch to Chaucer, from the Fathers of the Church to Marlowe, Jodelle and De la Cerda (Bono and Tessitore 1998; Kailuweit 2005; Iulietto 2014). This resulted in a huge and varied amount of material for all the English poets and playwrights who looked back at classical Rome, and its myths and legends, for inspiration during the Renaissance. Rome became indeed a highly symbolic place, functioning as a fictional counterpart for contemporary England (Kewes 2006). In the evolving context of a nation yet in the making, the *Aeneid* story in particular was taken as "a model for Britain's self-fashioning as a 'second Troy'" (Williams 2006: 32). By insisting on the legendary kinship between Britain's first king, Brutus, and Aeneas, as claimed by Geoffrey of Monmouth in his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, five different translations of Virgil's epic were produced between 1513 and 1582 (Tudeau-Clayton 2009: 389-403). If all these works implied nuanced references to the political situation of the time, after Elizabeth's accession to the throne in 1558 the love story between Aeneas and Dido became potentially dangerous ground upon which to tread. A connection between the widow Dido, seduced and abandoned by a foreigner, and the unmarried Queen of England wooed by many European princes could indeed be easily traced. Furthermore, the debate surrounding Dido's virtue had

[2] See, among others, Knox (1995); Binns (1973); Thomas (2001); Miller (2004: 55-72); Piazzi (2007); Ziosi (2015: 62-136).

been going on for centuries and the knowledgeable Elizabeth must have been well aware of the several, contrasting opinions: was Dido the respectable queen of the pre-Virgilian tradition, or the inflamed lover who fell for Aeneas, oblivious of the greater significance of her political role? Was she the wronged woman of the Ovidian tale, or simply a woman unable to restrain her passions and consequently unfit for rule (Williams 2006: 33-8)? Evidently, the risk of upsetting the sovereign was very high, and dealing with topics that alluded to Elizabeth's marital status could result in severe punishments: the Puritan pamphleteer John Stubbs, for instance, had his right hand cut off for advising the queen against a possible marriage with the French Duke of Alençon (Berry: 1968).

When Gager chose to write a play on Dido and stage it during such an important occasion as the visit of Count Alasco, therefore, he must have been perfectly aware of the implicit dangers. Even if Deanne Williams is undoubtedly right in acknowledging that Dido clearly is what Elizabeth is not, the risk of an opposite interpretation was still there (Williams 2006: 41). This could be the reason why, while following Virgil's *Aeneid* quite tightly, at the very beginning Gager highlights his Dido's unmistakable fitness for rule. When Dido first enters on stage in I.ii, she is in the middle of a significant discussion on how to consolidate her power with her skilful and Machiavellian advisors, Hanno and Maharbal:

DIDO
[…] Now I must see how my position in the city can be made constant, how I can induce the gods who favored me until now to support me always.
HANNO
A kingdom is maintained by the same arts that gained it. Just show that piety that has made the gods favor you. Because you displayed it, you render us secure. (I.ii.121-7)[3]

Unmistakably, showing a queen who could rely on the knowledge of the "arts" of government and the favour of the gods meant

[3] All references to Gager's *Dido* are from Gager 1994 and will appear parenthetically in the text: "DIDO. […] nunc est videndum qui mihi constans status / in urbe fiat, quomodo faciam deos / adhunc faventes, semper ut faveant mihi. / HANNO. quibus obtinetur artibus regnum potens / iis tenetur. prima quae fecit deos / pietas faventes servat, id praestamodo. / quod praestitisti, nosque securos facis".

rendering a straightforward tribute on Gager's part to his present-day sovereign, who was successfully handling the political and religious issues of the age. In assuming the cult of the Virgin Mary and also using religion as "an act of statesmanship", to put it in Patrick Collinson's words, Elizabeth I had indeed managed to create the myth of the Virgin Queen married to her nation and was actually keeping England safe, just as Gager's Dido is said to be able to do (Collinson 1967: 29; Doran 1996; Collinson 2013).

Right after Hanno's reply, however, a menace lurking on Carthage is brought to the queen's attention by Maharbal: "They say ships have come to our coast, either because a storm has driven them hither or (as I am inclined to believe), because they have come here to despoil your people in war" (I.ii.130-3)[4]. The fear of a foreign invasion that immediately worried the alert Dido was something that all those living in Elizabethan England knew well. At the time, Elizabeth's Catholic enemy *par excellence*, Philip II of Spain, was indeed organising the famed Armada, which was supposed to defeat his heretic adversary once and for all. For this reason, the English Secretary of State, Sir Francis Walsingham, was trying to do all in his power to send intelligencers to the continent, so as to hinder possible Catholic plots against the queen. "Should I think of you as guests or enemies? Or as both? For sometimes the two become confused" (I.iii.145-6), asks a cautious Dido when first meeting a group of Trojans who enter her palace rooms[5]. After being reassured about their good intentions and hearing of their misadventures on the sea, however, Dido is deeply moved. She cannot fail to acknowledge the similarity between their misfortunes and her own experience before reaching Carthage's shores. Generously, she grants them the sought-after hospitality while they are waiting to find their leader, Aeneas, whose fame was well known to the queen:

> Who is unfamiliar with your city, with Aeneas' lineage? Who does not know about your burning, your wars, your virtues, your men? Our hearts are not so ignorant, the sun does not avert his horses so far from us Tyrians.

[4] "littus ad nostrum ferunt / venisse naves, sive tempestas eas / ad egit illuc, sive (quod potius reor) / venere fines Marte praedari tuos".

[5] "Hospites an hospes vos putem? / an utrosque? Nempe saepe confundi solent".

Whatever direction your journey takes, Trojans, I shall support you with my resources and aid. (I.iii.193-8)[6]

In making Dido grant such warm welcome to the derelict Trojans, however, not only does Gager follow the Virgilian tale, but he also establishes another direct connection with his present day. Not all foreigners were enemies: just as the Phoenician queen had shown Aeneas and his men due hospitality, Elizabeth I was doing the same with her distinguished guest, Count Alasco, in whose honour Gager's own play was being performed. Unsurprisingly, the topicality of the situation was underscored by Gager in the following hymn sung by Iopas in II.ii. Here, the singer entertains Dido's guests with "lengthy praises" of the queen's generosity and, most significantly, addresses her by referring to the queen's other name that history and epic have transmitted: Elyssa (Rupprecht 1959). It was easy for Gager to turn Elyssa into "Elisa/Eliza" and the noisy crowd in the royal palace of Carthage into the "happy voices ring[ing] through this great hall" of Corpus Christi College (II.i.358-60)[7]:

IOPAS: […] But though you [Aeneas] are so great and overwhelm my heart's understanding, Elisa is yet greater, oh guest so fortunate to have Elisa as hostess. Nobody is any lesser, save in comparison to her, nor should it shame you to be called the lesser. The world sees nothing like or equal to our Elisa. (II.i.337-43)[8]

If then, from the onset, Gager establishes oblique, though persistent, connections with his sovereign and present-day England, it is in II.v that these become patent. After welcoming Aeneas in her palace and pouring a libation to Jupiter to protect both Tyrians and Trojans, Dido's suspicious fondness for the hero starts worrying her politically alert advisors. As Boas first remarked, "Dido's hospitality

[6] "quis nescit urbem? Nescit Aeneadum genus? / quis nescit ignes, bella, virtutes, viros? / non corda sic obtusa gestamus, neque / tam sol remotos vertit a Tyriis equos. / quocunque cursum flectitis, Troes, meis / opibus iuvabo, vos et auxilio meo".

[7] "longus […] plausus"; "laetae volitant per ampla / atria voces".

[8] "sis licet tantus superersque nostri / pectoris captum, tamen es Elisa / maior, o hospes nimium beate / hospite Elisa. / est minor nemo sino comparatus, / neve te dici pudent minorem. / nil videt nostrae simile aut secundum orbis Elisae".

to her guest makes Maharbal afraid that she will reject her other suitors for him and thus plunge Africa into war. But Hanno favours the match on the ground (*probably suggested by Elizabeth's own situation*) that a mighty queen, of full age, should be allowed to make her own choice" (Boas 1914: 186, emphasis mine). Elizabeth's situation, as mentioned above, was a difficult and dangerous one. Even though she had been toying with many foreign suitors since her ascent to the throne, many were worried about her possible choice of a husband in the precarious political and religious context of the time (Doran 1996). Refusing to accept anyone's advice on the matter, the queen was continuing to play with fire while simultaneously strengthening her image of chaste mother of the nation. In *Dido*, then, by presenting this animated exchange of views between the queen's advisors, which is of course absent in any other previous source, Gager consciously chose to deal with the issue and probably shared Hanno's – but also likely Elizabeth's – remark: "do you think she marry [*sic*] according to your wishes or to her own?" (II.v.450)[9]. Showing his trust in the fictional queen's ultimately wise decision, the playwright was undoubtedly sure not to distress the real one.

Despite these connections with 1580s England, however, Dido and Aeneas's love story was written in the history of literature, and Gager did not alter anything about its well-known development. The couple inevitably fall in love, and even the frightening apparition of Sicheus's ghost ends up being of no use – apart from testifying to Gager's awareness of the Senecan elements that were hitting the London stages. Sicheus's fierce remarks against foreigners and guests go unheard, and just like Virgil's Dido, Gager's queen gradually falls prey to a passion so absolute and "shameful" that it leads her to become utterly oblivious to her own role as a sovereign: "Now they have spent the entire winter in luxury" – the Chorus comments – "unmindful of government" (III.iii.752-3)[10]. Deeply contrasting with Gager's first staging of Dido as a very political queen, her forgetting what her public role meant and the consequences which such carelessness could bring is an aspect on which Gager focuses much attention through the very last scenes of his play. After Aeneas's contested departure and Dido's own inevitable suicide, which will

[9] "regina […] / tuove potius nubet arbitrio an suo?"
[10] "nunc se luxis hiemem / ducere totam regni immemores".

be discussed in the following section, Gager brings the Chorus on stage one last time. Here, instead of merely lamenting the miserable queen's misadventures or blaming her for her immoral behaviour, the playwright underlines once more the dire consequences of her irresponsible political actions: "The destruction of nations" – the Chorus ominously predicts – "stands graven in adamantine letters" (V.ii.1209-10)[11]. The true significance of the play thus shifts again into the spotlight: amorous passion in general makes sovereigns unfit for rule and foreign marriages in particular always hide the serious risk of damaging the nation itself, by plunging it into new conflicts. In the light of the caution shown so far, one might ask why Gager chose to tread on such dangerous ground right at the end of the play. As the queen had already proved her dislike of being advised on such matters, she might have taken these lines as a personal offence, and the consequences could have been as serious as those experienced by Stubbs. However, Williams is right in claiming that it was clear to everyone that Virgil's Dido, and thus Gager's, on whom she is largely modelled, was clearly different from Elizabeth. Far from being deceived by the foreign princes coming to England to ask her in marriage, Elizabeth had proved and was indeed still proving to be perfectly able to handle the precarious situation of her marital status and postpone her final decision as much as she liked – possibly forever. Although it is probable that Gager was venting some kind of widespread concern about the possibility of the queen's French marriage, he must have realised Elizabeth's firm intention never to marry. In the epilogue, apart from praising Alasco as "a guest greater than Aeneas", Gager actually celebrates Elizabeth's own superiority and skilful choice of remaining chaste:

> But our times have produced few Didos, and I imagine our women have grown more prudent. I doubt any woman will die of a broken heart. But, Dido, one woman surpasses you by far: our virgin queen […]. Tyrian Elisa came to a piteous end. But I pray *our* Eliza lives, will continue living, so that as she reigns she will long see such guests […]. You should give your applause for *this* Elisa (Ep. 1238-56, emphasis mine)[12].

[11] "stant adamantinis / consignata notis funera gentium".

[12] "Sed vita paucas nostra Didones videt, / prudentiores faemenas factas reor, / amore nullam credo morituram gravi. / sed una longe, Elisa, te superat tamen. / regina virgo […] / sed Elisa fato Tyria miserando occubat. / at nostra Elisa vivit,

3. Traces of Ovid

In his introduction to Gager's tragedy, Sutton rightly states that "at first sight, *Dido* is a straightforward adaptation of Vergil", but that "this is not quite the whole story" (Sutton 1994: 242). It is not only the above-mentioned topicality that the play acquires in the context of Elizabethan England that makes Gager's work different from Virgil's. What this section will try to show, with no pretence at completeness, is the intermittent, yet undeniable, presence of Ovid's version of the Dido story under the surface of Gager's apparently total adherence to the Virgilian tale. This is actually an aspect on which critics have never focused their attention, being more interested in highlighting (correctly) Gager's debt to Virgil (Bono and Tessitore 1998: 166-71; Sutton 1994: 241-50; Ziosi 2015: 51-3).

Both Virgil's and Ovid's works had always enjoyed wide success in Europe. They had been present in school curricula for a long time and drawn upon by poets, scholars and philosophers. Starting from the thirteenth century, however, Ovid had particularly thrived in the cultural world, thanks to the popularity of his moralised, or even Christianised, versions (Robathan 1973: 191-209; Dimmick 2002: 264-87). Throughout the Renaissance, he remained a favourite author, and a widespread revaluation of his original style and works began all over the continent (James 2009). Sixteenth-century England, in particular, found in Ovid

> a fertility of invention with a refinement of expression which profoundly influenced the subsequent development of English Literature. To Ovid, Britain would probably have been as barren and uncomprehending as Pontus, but it was here […] that his spirit became again the centre of a lively, talented society just discovering its full potentialities. (Jameson 1973: 241)

This being said, it is not implausible to claim that a refined playwright such as Gager, educated in the classics and in the imitation- and translation-based teaching methods of the time, had also Ovid's oeuvre in mind when setting out to write his own adaptation of

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et vivat precor, / tales que regnans ospite videat diu […] huic vos Elisae tollere applausum decet".

Aeneid's books I, II and IV (Brown 1999: 1-84; Lyne 2002: 249-63; Burrow 2002: 301-19).

The first reference to Ovid in Gager's *Dido* can be found in the prologue, when he justifies his decision to opt for a tragedy after the staging of the comedy *Rivales* on the night of 12 June. Interestingly, while referring to both Aristotle's and Horace's theories on the pleasantness of tragic stories, Gager defends his choice with the fact that mutability dominates every single aspect of man's life and it is the one element which is constantly creating new sources of pleasure: "Everything undergoes shifting changes, and variety itself imparts a pleasing aspect. How can things which often occur continue to please? Change always provides greater enjoyment" (Prol. 1-4)[13]. Given the enormous success that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was enjoying in England after Arthur Golding's 1565 translation, Gager's reference to the topic of Ovid's masterpiece can be considered a plausible connection between the two works. What did the kaleidoscopic metamorphoses told by Ovid actually provide (at least on a first reading level), if not the enjoyment Gager himself mentions (Feldherr 2002: 163-79)? Also, Ovid's very choice of writing about mutability and metamorphosis has been interpreted as "signalling that [the poet] is taking his own, unVirgilian way" (Kenney 2009: 231). In this regard, Joseph B. Solodow (1988: 142) argued that

> [while] Vergil tries to convince us that the primary story for his culture was the destiny of Rome and of the virtues required to realize that destiny […], Ovid makes the story of a series of stories, many of which contradict the Virgilian virtues. The form which Ovid gives to the *Aeneid* implies an extreme relativity; it teaches us to be suspicious.

Thus, Gager's hinting at the pleasantness of Ovidian mutability might well be taken as some subtle advice to be "suspicious" and prepared for his own "unVirgilian" tone in *Dido*. After all, the reference to the influential role played by the changing fate is not just a fleeting one in Gager's play, since he also revisits it in the Chorus closing Act I. After showing Dido's moved attitude towards

[13] "res quaeque varias invicem patitur vices, / et ipsa gratam varietas formam parit. / quae saepe fiunt illa cui placeant diu? / vicissitudo semper oblectat magis".

Aeneas and his Trojans, resulting in the queen granting them hospitality in Carthage, the Chorus significantly comments on the event by focusing once again on the unpredictable shifts of fortune:

> On unsteady foot, our fortune is born. It raises us up, casts us down again, makes the highest and lowest to be equal, fickle towards both this side and that. It adds woes to us in our adversity, burdens those whom it sees laid low, following the worse course. (I.vi.247-52)[14]

What are these "adversities" if not again a peculiar manifestation of the "mutability" Gager had already asserted to be an essential part of what makes life agreeable? Indeed, even as events might go wrong, he adds, new and unexpected changes can suddenly overturn situations and resolve everything for the best: "Night brings back the day, clouds the sun, and happy things come when hardship recede. Alas, the ocean was in upheaval, but, oho, he rejoices inside" (I.vi.263-6)[15].

In addition, another element to take into consideration, which once more points at Gager's subtle references to Ovid, is the sceptical and even demystifying attitude towards religion and the gods that characterises both the *Metamorphoses* and Dido's lament in the *Heroides*. As mentioned above, at the beginning of Gager's play Dido is presented as a wise and pious queen. However, upon close reading of the text, her devotion is shown to be more the result of a skilful political attitude than actual faith. When she asks what she can do to "induce the gods […] to support [her] always", her advisors reply that she should just show the same "arts" she had already "displayed" in previous circumstances. Devotion, the playwright seems to imply, should be only employed as a useful political means to "render [subjects] secure". This was precisely what Elizabeth I herself was doing at the time in order to keep England safe in the middle of the bloody conflicts between Catholics and Protestants (Guy 1995: 126-49). Apart from such topical references, however, by making deft use of this element, Gager introduces readers and audience to a

[14] "fertur incerto pedesors in altum. / tollit, errursus premit, ima summis / aequat, in partem levis hanc et illam. / addit afflictis mala rebus, urget / quos videt pronos, sequitur que partem / deteriorem".

[15] "nox diem, solem nebulae reductunt, / laeta succedunt ubi dura cedunt. / heu fuit clamor pelagi, sed intus / io triumphat".

play where a general scepticism towards the actual influence of the supernatural world on human destinies can be inferred. This could plausibly have been an element that Gager coined from Ovid's own mocking attitude towards such matters (Galinsky 1975; Rosati 1983). In the *Metamorphoses*, in particular, Ovid parodied all ancient deities by uncompassionately showing them to be victims of all too often bestial desires and thus underscoring their pettiness and demystifying their authority (Galinsky 1976). As Julia Dyson Hejduk (2009: 107) argues,

> The Olympians in the *Metamorphoses* are an unsavoury lot, lustful, duplicitous, vengeful, petty, and, in short, having no redeeming features whatsoever […]. As is often noticed, they are thoroughly human – or worse than human – and transparent stand-ins for the Roman senate and Princeps.

In Gager's *Dido*, the first oblique reference to the dubious role played by divinities in people's life can be found in the same lines mentioned above, where the Chorus introduced the pivotal theme of the very Ovidian mutability: "the gods are […] savage in that they neither oppress all equally, nor are uniformly favourable to all" (I.iv.253-7)[16]. Being shown from the very beginning as unreliable and unpredictable, Gager's gods do not look very different from Ovid's. As a result, in a world ruled by changing fate, ambiguous deities and by a queen who is said to play with religion at will, even the lines Gager adapted from the much more pious Virgil acquire an unexpected demystifying allure. When Dido's sister, Anna, for instance, invites her not to fight against her blossoming love for Aeneas, she dismisses her sister's memories of her dead husband, Sicheus, as follows: "Do you think shades care about this?" (II. vi.487-8)[17].

Such a creeping scepticism towards the gods and the supernatural world in general, moreover, is not only expressed by Anna or external characters such as the Chorus. It also emerges from Dido's own words. Again, the evidence that Gager must have had Ovid's works

[16] "sunt in haec causa superi furentes, / nec premunt omnes pariter nec adsunt / omnibus omnes".
[17] "id tu putas / curare manes?"

well in mind while writing his tragedy can be detected already at the end of the previously mentioned II.v. Before staging Dido's entrance on stage and portraying her consuming passion for Aeneas, Gager presents Hanno and Maharbal discussing Dido's possible marriage. At this point, they significantly question two of the most legendary women who suffered because of their foreign spouses, and whose unfortunate stories Ovid had retold in the *Metamorphoses* and the *Heroides*, along with Dido's:

MAHARBAL
But think how guests' faith is to be regarded. Let Theseus teach you by Ariadne's injury, Jason by Medea's. Foreigners' desertion is commonplace. (II.v.457-9)[18]

This reference to the two outraged Ovidian characters, which is not in the *Aeneid*, cannot be a coincidence on Gager's part. Rather, it seems to be a clear expression of his willingness to connect his Dido to Ovid's, while at the same time closely following Virgil's more respectable plot. Also, when Gager's queen discovers Aeneas's plan to leave Carthage incognito for Rome and abandons herself to the same heart-breaking lament already skilfully imagined by Virgil, one cannot fail to detect in her lines the harsh resentment Ovid had attributed to his own Dido. While raging against the "cruel man", "the foreigner", "the traitor"[19] who had monstrously deceived her, she rancorously mocks Aeneas's appeal to the gods as a justification for his decision: "The monstrous outrage! He offered as an excuse the oracle, the unoffending gods […]. This concern of his, this effort, claims that the gods support it, *although perhaps they are indifferent*" (IV.ii.855-61, emphasis mine)[20]. It would be in vain to look for these lines in Virgil. Aeneas's obedience and high mission is never really doubted in the *Aeneid*. The same scorn can be found, instead, in Ovid's *Heroides* when, in her epistle, Dido exclaims: "But you are bid to go – by your god! Ah, would he had forbidden you to

[18] "at subeat animo quaesit hospitibus fides / habenda: Theseus doceat Ariadnae malo, / Iason Medeae. trita peregrinis fuga est".
[19] "crudelis", "hospes", "perfide".
[20] "proh facinus ingens! vatem et insontes deos / praetendit […] haec cura superos, hisdeosurgetlabor, / forsanquietos".

come […]!" (Ovid, *Heroides*, trans. Showerman, VII.139-40, p. 93)[21]. If this was not enough, in Gager's IV.iv, when it is clear that Aeneas is leaving, Dido retaliates: "I scarcely fear the gods. Rumour terrifies me" (IV.iv.935)[22]. Once again, while revealing to Anna the fear she has for her reputation and not for those gods she has already said to be too busy minding their own business, Gager's Dido seems to be inspired by Ovid's queen who, at the beginning of her epistle, claims to be consciously acting against "god's will": "Not because I hope you may be moved by prayer of mine do I address you – for with God's will adverse I have begun the words you read" (Ovid, *Epistles*, VII.3-4)[23]. Unsurprisingly, then, when Gager shows her performing the sacred rites alone, her "incantations" – as Dido calls them – look more like Medea's magical rites than the sacrifice for Jupiter that Virgil's Dido performs. Even from a linguistic point of view, Gager must have clearly drawn inspiration from *The Metamorphoses*, rather than the *Aeneid*. Ovid's sorceress appeals, indeed, to "Three-formèd Hecate", "Moon", "ye winds, and airs, ye mountains, lakes and streams" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Melville, VII.194-7, p. 150)[24], and Dido's speech in Gager plays on the same images:

> Crew of still Erebus, […] *triform Hecate*, never sufficiently invoked, infinite Chaos, you shapeless mass, and you *Diana* whom men call triform, a partner of night and judge of evil, be your present […]. *Mountains*, *rivers*, *winds*, *lakes*, *torrents*, *valleys*, *oceans*, all manner of plants flourishing with death-dealing flowers, be present also. My incantation requires your handiwork. (V.ii.1025-42, emphasis mine)[25]

In spite of her political alertness, Dido's tragic passion for Rome's pious hero inevitably leads her to forget her role as a sovereign

[21] "Sed iubet ire deus – vellem, vetuisset adire […]!"
[22] "haud metuo deos. / me fama terret".
[23] "Necquia te nostra sperem prece posse moveri, / adloquo – adverso movimus ista deo".
[24] "triceps Hecate", "Luna", "auraeque et venti, montesque amnesque lacusque" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Anderson, p. 152).
[25] "silentis Erebi vulgus, […] et nunquam satis / Hecate triformis dicta, et immensum chaos, / informe pondus, quamque tergeminam vocant / Diana, noctis conscia, et iudex mali / adeste […] Montes, flumina, et venti, lacus / amnesque, valles, maria, et herbarum genus, / quotquot viretis flore mortifero simul / adeste. Vestras postulate carmen manus".

and eventually take her own life. If this is what Virgil himself had imagined, still it is also another reference to the essentially Ovidian overarching theme of the play: the subjection of political greatness to the impulse of passion. Although Ovid was not the first to deal with such a topic, as Jonathan Bate (1993: 6) claimed,

> what Ovid taught […] was that everything changes […] and this accorded with his desire as a dramatist to examine human beings at key moments of change in their lives, such as when they fall in love or make a renunciation or, more drastically, decide to kill themselves.

This is what Gager himself did. Even when staging a queen who has much in common with Elizabeth I, especially in her pragmatic approach towards statesmanship and religion, he cannot spare her the tragic destiny she chooses when she subdues to her love passion for Aeneas.

In conclusion, far from limiting himself to adapting an already well-known episode of Virgil's *Aeneid*, in *Dido* Gager skilfully managed to infuse his adaptation of the Virgilian tale with elements pertaining to Ovid's more sceptical "philosophy of instability" (Bate 1993: 6). Well aware of the unmistakable parallelism he had established between Dido and Elizabeth I, however, Gager also knew that he had to mark their differences as clearly as possible, in order not to upset his real and oversensitive sovereign. As mentioned above, indeed, he prudently chose to conclude his play with a due acknowledgement to Elizabeth's far wiser choice to remain their "virgin queen".

This article has tried to shed some light on one of the best products of the English academic drama of the sixteenth century – a research field which deserves to be explored further. *Dido* particularly shows how the skilful use of Rome and its culture on Gager's part not only enabled him to create a remarkable play, but also to prove the vitality of classical heritage. Far from being considered a dead letter, in Elizabethan England the potentialities of such heritage were constantly reactivated and exploited in order to acquire new, significant meanings. As Gager's *Dido* demonstrates perfectly, the playwright's use of Rome's cultural inheritance was the perfect means simultaneously to educate actors and audience while stimulating reflections on topical issues of his time.

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