

Busenello's *Didone*: Rewriting the Virgilian Myth of Venice

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Virgil's Anna went to absorb, with her own mouth, the residue of the deceased Dido's soul, the remnants of her spirit: I see here, with my restoring memory, the relics of my father's and my brother's enjoyments, both of whom were most enamored of this place. And like the man who kills two birds with one stone, on my own bed I perform the obsequies of these honored departed; and since solitude is a sweet fomentation for melancholy, I imagine that after my death you shall celebrate many anniversaries here in remembrance of my life. And it is certain that if the souls that lack a better life have the liberty to roam as they desire, with the permission of the Elysian Fields I shall stroll through these halls, I shall loiter among these orchards, and without occupying a site or filling a place I shall play here with my little Perino. But no more. Stay well. Legnaro, 29 September 1659. Your most loving father, Giovan Francesco Busenello.¹

With these lines the Venetian lawyer-poet ends his last letter to his son, written a month before he died at his beloved family villa at Legnaro on the mainland where he had come to spend his remaining days. In his youth, Giovan Francesco Busenello (1598-1659) had studied at Padua under the materialist philosopher Cesare Cremonini who insisted on the mortality of the soul; and the valedictory letter of the libertine writer, who occasionally referred to this conviction in his poetry, indeed testifies to a somewhat unorthodox notion of life after death.² Without wasting time meditating on eternal salvation, he not only exchanges the Christian heaven for the pagan Elysium: much rather than going to any of these places, he

¹ "Anna in Virgilio andava con la bocca propria assorbendo gl'avanzi dell'anima, i frangenti dello spirito dell'estinta Didone: io qui vedo con la memoria migliorando le reliquie de i godimenti di mio padre e di mio fratello già innamoratissimi di questo luogo. E come colui che in un viaggio fa due servitii, con il mio letto medesimo canto l'esequie a quelli honorati defonti; e perchè la solitudine è un dolce fomento alla malinconia, penso che dopo le mie ceneri voi qui celebrerete lunghi anniversarii alla ricordanza della mia vita. Et è certo che se l'anime già mancanti a vita migliore hanno libertà di vagare a loro talento, io con pace de' campi Elisei passeggerò questi andii, otiero tra questi giardini, e non occupando sitto nè riempiendo luogo, sarò a trastullarmi col mio Perino. Ma non più. State sano. Legnaro, a 29 settembre: 1659. Vostro padre amantissimo, Gio. Fran.^{co} Busenello." Quoted from Jean-François Lattarico, *Busenello: Un théâtre de la rhétorique* (Classiques Garnier: Paris, 2013), 75-76n. Translations from Italian, French and German are the author's.

² On Anna's reference to the mortality of the soul in Busenello's *Didone*, see Pietro Yates Moretti, *The Beginnings of Republican Opera: Gian Francesco Busenello and His Composers: Claudio Monteverdi and Francesco Cavalli* (LAP Lambert Academic Publishing: Saarbrücken, 2010), 158-59; Giovan Francesco Busenello, *Delle ore ociose / Les Fruits de l'oisiveté*, ed. Jean-François Lattarico (Classiques Garnier: Paris, 2016), 383-85n.

would prefer to linger behind in the house and the garden where his relatives spent their happiest days, as a friendly ghost, a spiritual presence, a loving memory. We cannot get closer to immortality, the letter suggests. Moreover, the last literary allusion of Busenello, whose writings are always rich in imagery and allegorical reflection, is not to any biblical text but to a classic of ancient Latin poetry, the *Aeneid* by “our adored Virgil”.³ Commemorating his late father and brother on his own deathbed, Busenello casts himself in the role of Dido’s sister Anna who, as the queen of Carthage expires, tries to “catch with my lips whatever latest breath flutters over hers.”⁴ But simultaneously he casts himself as the dying Dido and his son as the grieving Anna, imagining how the latter will return to their estate in an attempt to absorb his late father’s spirit. With these metaphorical doublings, the dramatic poet points to the way human beings may be connected spiritually through the performance of the same actions, such as walking through the house, playing with the dog in the garden, mourning, or dying. Moreover, the reference to Dido’s death evokes a reading of the *Aeneid* in which the focus is less on the epic feats of Aeneas, the hero striving for immortal fame, than on those human bonds, which are more valuable, but which only last as long as the people they connect. It was the exploration of these themes which, almost twenty years earlier, had characterized Busenello’s adaptation of the story of Dido and Aeneas, his second opera libretto, *La Didone*.

Virgil, Dolce, Busenello and the tragic genre

In the brief “Argomento” that introduces *La Didone* (1641), Busenello makes clear that he has refused to follow the “prescription of the ancient rules”, which require dramatic poets to observe the unities of time, place and action. Hence, the first act is set in Troy and the last two acts partly on the Mediterranean and

³ “il nostro adorato Virgilio.” *Lettera scritta dal fu Sig. Gio. Fran.co Busenello ad un virtuoso suo amico richiedendo del proprio parere intorno al di lui dramma la Statira* (c. 1656), quoted from Arthur Livingston, *La vita veneziana nelle opere di Gian Francesco Busenello* (Officine grafiche V. Callegari: Venice, 1913), 373.

⁴ “extremus si quis super halitus errat, / ore legam.” Virgil, *The Aeneid*, in *Virgil in Two Volumes*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, vol. I (Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA, 1986), IV.684-85.

partly in and around Carthage.⁵ Moreover, in accordance with the “good doctrines” that allow poets to alter both myth and history to suit their artistic needs, the queen of Carthage does not commit suicide in this Venetian version of the story.⁶ Though Dido stabbing herself with Aeneas’ sword after he has abandoned her is one of the most iconic moments in the *Aeneid*, in Busenello’s adaptation Didone ends up marrying Iarba, king of the Gaetuli. The poet defends this surprising plot twist by reminding his readers that Virgil himself was guilty of a “famous anachronism” when he let Dido kill herself in despair over Aeneas’ departure.⁷ Busenello is referring to the pre-Virgilian—and presumed historical—version of the story, which was well known to early modern readers, and according to which the queen killed herself when her people demanded that she marry Iarbas and thus break her vow to remain faithful to her murdered husband Sychaeus. Giovanni Petrarca, among others, had accused Virgil of blemishing the reputation of the chaste and pious Dido of ancient tradition by turning her into the victim of an improper erotic passion.⁸

By letting Didone marry Iarba immediately after Enea has left, Busenello took the story in an entirely new direction, however, and as always his insistence on the right to poetic license has ideological implications that reflect his non-conformist views. In *La Didone*, he takes on the traditional interpretation of the *Aeneid*, central to the official so-called ‘myth of Venice’, offering a subtle critique of the moral values that underpinned the republic’s educational system, gender roles and ideals of civic conduct.

As Craig Kallendorf has shown in his study of the reception of Virgil in Renaissance Venice, the author of the *Aeneid* was by far the most widely read poet in its humanist schoolrooms at the end of the sixteenth

⁵ “Quest’opera sente delle opinioni moderne. Non è fatta al prescritto delle antiche regole, ma all’usanza spagnuola rappresenta gl’anni e non le ore.” Quotations from the libretto are taken from Busenello, *Delle ore ociose*.

⁶ “E perché secondo le buone dottrine è lecito ai poeti non solo alterare le favole ma le istorie ancora, Didone prende per marito Iarba.” Busenello, *La Didone*, “Argomento”.

⁷ “E se fu anacronismo famoso in Virgilio che Didone non per Sicheo suo marito, ma per Enea perdesse la vita, potranno tollerare I grandi ingegni che qui seguia un matrimonio diverso e dalle favole e dalle istorie.” Busenello, *La Didone*, “Argomento”.

⁸ For a useful overview of the reception of the Dido story before Busenello, see Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women’s Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (University of California Press: Berkeley CA, 2004), 89-96. For an in-depth study of the topic, see Renato Ricco, *Sulle tracce di Didone: La regina cartaginese nelle fonti classiche e nella letteratura italiana fino a Metastasio: Origini e sviluppo del mito* (PhD thesis: Università degli Studi di Salerno, 2012).

century (and presumably into the seventeenth century as well).⁹ The highly tendentious interpretation of the epic was determined by the pedagogical uses to which it was put: it was primarily used to teach young male members of the elite such republican virtues as bravery, determination and prudence, Stoic constancy in the face of adversity, love of glory and fatherland, subjection of the passions to the command of reason, and above all *pietas*, i.e. piety towards God but also a sense of righteousness and selfless duty towards one’s family, friends and compatriots. Virgil’s “pius Aeneas” was regarded as the embodiment of these qualities. In the words of the Flemish scholar and educator Jodocus Ascensius, whose Latin commentary to the *Aeneid* received no less than twenty-four print editions in Venice during the sixteenth century, he was quite simply a “mirror and pattern of the perfect man”.¹⁰

As commentators and teachers made Virgil’s poem conform to conventional moral standards, they systematically downplayed Aeneas’ moral failings. This was the case, for example, in the free Italian translation of the *Aeneid*, by the Venetian humanist Lodovico Dolce, published posthumously in 1572, which was accompanied by a series of moralizing “Allegorie”.¹¹ Here the reader learns that Aeneas who takes up arms to defend the fallen city of Troy, rather than fighting an absurd battle, shows “the goodness of the good citizen who will not abandon his fatherland even at the very last, and who will never be accused of having abandoned it.”¹² When he nevertheless decides to flee, miraculously carrying his old father unscathed out of the burning city, the commentator makes no mention of Aeneas’ failure to protect his wife Creüsa but rather points out how his own successful escape shows that “a religious and pious man is

⁹ Craig Kallendorf, *Virgil and the Myth of Venice: Books and Readers in the Italian Renaissance* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1999), 49.

¹⁰ “[...] speculum atque exemplar perfecti viri”. Jodocus Ascensius’ prefatory letter to Lodovicus de Flandria. Original and translation quoted from Kallendorf, *Virgil and the Myth of Venice*, 45.

¹¹ See Kallendorf, *Virgil and the Myth of Venice*, 183-86.

¹² “Nel [...] Enea [...] si comprende la bontà d’un buon cittadino, che non vuol abbandonar la patria infino all’estremo, ne vuol haver mai esser ripreso d’haverla abbandonata.” Lodovico Dolce, *L’Achille et l’Enea di Messer Lodovico Dolce, dove egli tessendo l’istoria della Iliade d’Homero à quella dell’Eneide di Vergilio, ambedue l’ha divinamente ridotte in ottava rima* (Gabriel Giolito de’ Ferrari: Venice, 1572), 269.

agreeable to God”.¹³ The commentator is also careful to acquit the hero of any responsibility for Dido’s tragic end. The consummation of their unsanctioned marriage in the cave reveals Dido’s behavior—not that of Aeneas—as an example of “the shrewdness of a lover who will not miss the offered occasion to satisfy her great desire.”¹⁴ And her desperate suicide shows us “how cautious women must be, especially if they are considered honorable and decent, not to fall prey to a lascivious appetite; for often they are deceived and left with nothing but dishonor, repentance and the unrelenting remorse of their tormented conscience.”¹⁵ Aeneas has no reason to feel remorse, however, since his decision to obey Jupiter’s command and abandon Dido shows us “the quality of a truly noble soul, which consists in having more regard for matters of honor than for those of pleasure, since the former always make him famous, while the latter often tend to defame him.”¹⁶

Unsurprisingly, this interpretation of Virgil’s epic is consonant with Dolce’s notions of womanhood, which he had set forth in his *Dialogo della institution delle donne* (1545), where chastity and religious devotion are seen as the most important virtues to be taught to women. In order to promote these in female education, incidentally, he advocated that women only be allowed to read Virgil among the Roman poets (though not all his works), together with the most chaste and moral parts of Horace.¹⁷ In 1546 Dolce then gave dramatic form to his reading of the *Aeneid* in the tragedy *Didone* (first printed in 1547), the last and most influential of three Italian dramatizations of the story from the sixteenth century, and the only one to

¹³ “In Enea [...] si considera quanto sia accetto a Dio un’huomo religioso e pio”. Dolce, *L’Achille et l’Enea*, 279.

¹⁴ “Per [Didone] [...] si nota l’accortezza d’un’amante, che non lascia perder punto del occasione che gli s’offerisce, per venir al fin del suo gran desiderio.” Dolce, *L’Achille et l’Enea*, 337.

¹⁵ “Per Didone [...] si conosce, [...] quanto debbono esser caute le donne, e massime quelle, che sono in concetto d’honorate, e d’honeste, in darsi in preda a uno lascivo appetito, peroche spesso elle sono ingannate, e non resta appresso di loro se non infamia, pentimento, e rimordimento continuo della tormentata coscienza.” Dolce, *L’Achille et l’Enea*, 347.

¹⁶ “Per Enea [...] si comprende qual sia la condition d’un anima veramente nobile, che non è altro, che attender più alle cose dell’onore, ch’ha quelle del diletto, peroche quelle lo fan sempre famoso, e queste lo sogliono fare spesso infame.” Dolce, *L’Achille et l’Enea*, 347.

¹⁷ Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo della institution delle donne, secondo li tre stati, che cadono nella vita humana* (Gabriel Giolito de’ Ferrari: Venice, 1545) 22a. Dolce’s ideas about the education of women are briefly discussed in Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 30-32; see also Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (University of Illinois Press: Urbana IL, 1956), 38-39, 45, 71.

be performed on stage.¹⁸ As in the accompanying allegories to his Virgil translation, Dolce portrays the Carthaginian queen as the frail and tormented victim of a destructive passion. In contrast to the way Enea is portrayed in the commentary, however, he emerges as something of an antihero who vacillates between his sense of fidelity towards his lover and his sense of duty towards Jupiter, which is closely related to his love of fame and of his tribe, predestined to rule the world. Duty prevails, of course, in accordance with the Stoic principles of official Venetian ideology. Notably, Dolce lets Mercurio predict not only that he will found Rome but that his descendants will found Venice as well.¹⁹ Here the messenger of the gods gives voice to a medieval legend, according to which the first Venetians were exiles from Troy, the patriotic playwright inscribing the Virgilian myth of the republic into his tragedy:²⁰

E i cui tardi nipoti, dopo molto
girar di cielo, e lungo spazio d'anni,
a un'altra gran città daranno inizio,
con più felice augurio, in mezo l'acque.
Ove la pace sempre, ove l'amore,
ove virtude, ove ogni bel costume
terranno il pregio in fin che duri il mondo.
Quivi la bella Astrea regnerà sempre
coronata i bei crin' di bianca oliva:
quivi ne' tempi torbidi et aversi
a travagliati fia tranquillo porto. (453-463)

¹⁸ The two earlier tragedies were *Dido in Cartagine* (1524) by Alessandro Pazzi de' Medici and *Didone* (1541) by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio. On the relation of Dolce's *Didone* to the ideology of the Counterreformation, see Corinne Lucas, "Didon: Trois réécritures tragiques du livre IV de l'Énéide dans le théâtre italien du XVIe siècle," in *Scritture di scrittura: Testi, generi, modelli nel Rinascimento*, ed. Giancarlo Mazzacurati and Michel Plaisance (Bulzoni Editore: Rome, 1987), 557-604; 595. On the premiere production of Dolce's *Didone*, in a private context in the Carnival of 1546, see Marzia Pieri, "Recitar la tragedia," in *Il verso tragico dal Cinquecento al Settecento: Atti del convegno di studi, Verona, 14-15 maggio 2003*, ed. Gilberto Lonardi and Stefano Verdino (Esedra: Padua, 2005), 9-38: 20-21.

¹⁹ As several commentators have noted, Dolce's Enea emerges a 'bourgeoisified' and rather un-heroic version of Virgil's prince; see Lucas, "Didon," 597-98; Stefano Tomassini, "L'abbaino veneziano di un 'operaio' senza fucina," in Lodovico Dolce, *Didone, tragedia*, ed. Stefano Tomassini (Edizioni Zara: Parma, 1996), ix-xliv: xxiv-xxviii; Anne Neuschäfer, "Le tragedie rinascimentali come manuali per i principi: Dalla *Dido in Cartagine* di Alessandro de' Pazzi (1524) alla *Didone* di Lodovico Dolce (1547)," in *Corti rinascimentali a confronto: Letteratura, musica, istituzioni*, ed. Barbara Marx, Tina Matarrese and Paolo Trovato (Franco Cesati Editore: Florence, 2003), 57-81: 77-79; Ricco, *Sulle tracce di Didone*, 249. Quotations from the tragedy are taken from Dolce, *Didone*, ed. Tomassini.

²⁰ Kallendorf, *Virgil and the Myth of Venice*, 26.

(And whose late descendants, after many revolutions of the sky and the space of many years, will found another great city, under happier omens, in the middle of the water, where peace, where love, where virtue, where all good morals will be held in esteem as long as the world lasts. There shall Astraea reign forever, her fair locks crowned with the white olive; there the troubled will find a tranquil port in dark and inimical times.)

As Renato Ricco has pointed out, Busenello’s libretto frequently echoes Dolce’s tragedy, the intertextual references drawing attention to the difference between their dramatic solutions.²¹ In fact, Busenello’s explicit avoidance of the “ancient rules” of tragic poetics and of a slavish dependence on Virgil’s epic read as an implicit rejection of Dolce’s *Didone*. The best-known dramatization of the story, written by a fellow Venetian, the earlier adaptation is almost dogmatic in its fidelity both to the poetic principles of Senecan tragedy and to the language of the *Aeneid*. Dolce adopted or paraphrased no less than 337 of Virgil’s verses, or almost half of Book IV,²² and his only significant departure from the plot of the epic enhances rather than lessens the tragic impact of the catastrophe: in the 1546 *Didone*, not only the queen commits suicide, but Anna as well, and the play ends cataclysmically with Iarba’s forces burning down Carthage and killing everyone in their way. If learned Venetians still regarded Dolce’s play as the authoritative dramatization of the Virgilian episode in 1641, the *Iieto fino* of Busenello’s *Didone*, in which Dolce’s murderous, unseen Iarba has been transformed into a dreamily sentimental comedy *innamorato*, must have come across as a surprising act of irreverence.

The difference between Dolce’s and Busenello’s attitudes towards the tragic genre is even more telling. Dolce, who would later translate all Seneca’s tragedies into Italian, faithfully imitated the structure, mood and themes of Senecan dramaturgy in his *Didone*.²³ Divided into five acts, it features a tragic chorus of

²¹ Ricco especially describes Didone’s non-prophetic dream (Act II, scene 2) and the *Iieto fine* as critical-parodic echoes of Didone’s prophetic dream (Act I scene 1) and the ominous prologue spoken by Amore in Dolce’s tragedy; see Ricco, *Sulle tracce di Didone*, 269, 280-81. Heller also mentions the scene with Sicheo (Act III, scene 8) as a borrowing from Dolce (Act III scene 1), but without noting its parodic implications; see Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 94.

²² Neuschäfer, “Le tragedie rinascimentali,” 68-69.

²³ Seneca, *Le tragedie, tradotte da M. Lodovico Dolce* (Gio. Battista et Marchion Sessa F.: Venice, 1560). On echoes of Senecan tragedy in *Didone*, see Neuschäfer, “Le tragedie rinascimentali,” 70, 72, 74, 76; Ricco, *Sulle tracce di Didone*, 249, 252, 256.

Donne Carthaginesi who comment on the action from a perspective of ominous fatalism, and it adheres rigorously to the classical unities: it has no scene changes, takes place during a single night, and restricts itself to the depiction of the events that lead immediately to the suicide of the title heroine. The prologue, which is spoken by Cupido disguised as Enea’s young son Ascanio, introduces the theme of “Senecan love *furor*:²⁴ a representation of the classical love god far removed from the mischievous and essentially comic Amore character we know from Busenello’s librettos. Dolce’s Cupido feeds not on ambrosia but on blood and tears, he tells the audience, and he intensely desires to see Didone descend to hell and her city bathed in the blood of its inhabitants. The action is driven forward by the inexorable force of fate, the invisible gods informing the characters of their will by means of omens that take place offstage and are described in lengthy messenger reports. The tragedy begins with the communication of two such prophetic omens: Didone has had a vision of her own death in a nightmare (Act I scene 1), and Enea has been visited by Mercurio who ordered him to leave Carthage (Act II scene 2). The dramatic turning point occurs, furthermore, when Didone is visited by the ghost of Sicheo who condemns her for her infidelity (Act III scene 1): as we hear later, his reproaches are instrumental in driving his guilt-ridden widow to her suicide (Act V scene 1). Both Didone’s nightmare and her encounter with the dead husband take their cues from Virgil who uses them to depict the queen’s inner torment. “Anna, my sister, what dreams thrill me with fears,” Virgil’s Dido asks shortly after her encounter with Aeneas;²⁵ and before her suicide, she seems to hear “sounds and speech as of her husband calling” from his marble chapel.²⁶ Dolce, however, turned these fleeting references into the motor of the action on the model of Seneca’s tragedies. By so doing, he created the image of a widow who is punished for disobeying the divine will that requires her to remain faithful to

²⁴ Barbara J. Bono, *Literary Transvaluation: From Virgilian Epic to Shakespearean Tragicomedy* (University of California Press: Berkeley CA, 1984), 88-89.

²⁵ “Anna soror, quae me suspensam insomnia terrent!” Virgil, *The Aeneid*, IV.9.

²⁶ “hinc exaudiri voces et verba vocantis / visa viri”. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, IV.461-61.

her dead husband, turning the story of Dido and Aeneas into a cautionary lesson in Stoic temperance and endurance, in the spirit of the Counterreformation.

In Busenello’s *Didone*, Dolce’s dramatic themes and structure are turned upside down. On the model of contemporary Spanish drama, it is divided into three rather than five acts, which already implies a freer dramatic structure; Dolce’s tragic chorus has been turned into a comic trio of Damigelle Cartaginesi who wantonly express their support of Didone’s amorous desires; and the classical unities, which were so scrupulously observed in the earlier play, are blatantly disregarded.²⁷ Moreover, Dolce’s Stoic notion of fate as a divine will that humans are obliged to carry out has given way to the libertine notion of fortune as a random force that compels humans to act prudently and independently.²⁸ In accordance with this different view of human agency, the gods are no longer invisible but enter the stage in all their anthropomorphic capriciousness. In addition to Iride who sings the prologue, Venere, Fortuna, Giunone, Eolo, Nettuno, Amore, Giove and Mercurio all intervene in the action, persuading each other, or bickering about the destinies of their various human protégés.²⁹ Since human lives are no longer controlled by a single and categorical divine will, the significance of omens, dreams and visions has also changed radically, Busenello’s

²⁷ Stefano La Via’s argument that Busenello’s libretto observes the unity of action seems to reflect an inaccurate notion of the concept; see “Ai limiti dell’impossibile: ‘Modernità’ veneziana di una tragicommedia in musica,” in *Francesco Cavalli: La Didone*, ed. Michele Girardi and Cecilia Palandri (Fondazione Teatro La Fenice di Venezia: Venice, 2005-6), 13-38: 13-18. The main storyline in *La Didone* does not depict a single action (in the Aristotelian sense) but at least three separate actions, each of which is initiated by an extrinsic factor (the gods): Enea’s decision to leave Troy (Act I); his seduction of Didone (Act II); and his departure, which prompts Didone to marry Iarba (Act III). Moreover, La Via does not consider the parallel story of Cassandra in Act I, which, even according to the most lenient interpretation of Aristotle, remains entirely unrelated to the main action of that act. In fact, Aristotle mentions “those who have treated the entire fall of Troy, rather than part of it (like Euripides),” as an example of tragedies that fail to observe the unity of action; see Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell, Loeb Classical Library 199 (Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA, 1995), 1456a15. That Busenello based the Cassandra side-plot specifically on the tragedy to which Aristotle refers, *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, rather points to a programmatic rejection of the Aristotelian unity of action on the poet’s part.

²⁸ On the centrality of fortune to Busenello’s dramaturgy, see the chapter “Ignoto Deo: La Fortune en scène,” in Jean-François Lattarico, *Venise incognita: Essai sur l’académie libertine au XVII^e siècle* (Honoré Champion: Paris, 2012), 351-74.

²⁹ Emiliana Iacovelli has suggested that the poet invested the pagan gods with a Christian religiosity reminiscent of the Counterreformation; see “Il mito di Didone nel teatro meridionale: Da Curzio Manara a Metastasio,” in *Partenope in scena: Studi sul teatro meridionale tra Seicento e Ottocento*, ed. Grazia Distaso (Cacucci Editore: Bari, 2007), 171-97: 176. This seems more relevant in the case of Dolce’s *Didone* than in that of Busenello’s (which Iacovelli partly misattribution to Curzio Manara, the impresario of the 1650 Naples production). The violent internal disagreements of the gods are hardly compatible with a Christian conception.

two most conspicuous borrowings from Dolce’s *Didone* highlighting, in a parodic manner, the futility of attributing prophetic meaning to such occurrences. In Act II scene 3, with a clear reference to the first and final scenes of Dolce’s tragedy, Busenello’s Didone tells Anna of a terrible dream she has just had:

Parvemi ch’una spada
il sen mi traffigesse
e che l’alta Cartago, ohimè, cadesse. (935-37)

(It seemed to me that a sword pierced my breast, and that lofty Carthage fell, alas.)

Anna’s reaction also mimes that of her namesake in the earlier play: “sprezza i vani fantasmi, / scaccia l’ombre insolenti” (despise those vain nightmares, drive away those insolent shades) (911-12). Unlike the advice of Dolce’s Anna, however, that of Busenello’s turns out to be sound, since the ‘prophecy’ is never fulfilled.³⁰ Likewise, the angrily ranting ghost of Sicheo in Act III scene 8—whose remonstrations drives Didone to her suicide in Dolce’s tragedy—turns out to be simply an ‘insolent shade’; his extravagant cursing of his widow are of no real consequence, since Didone will marry Iarba a few moments later:

A chi vive nel mondo
una morte sovrasta,
ma per castigo tuo consenta il Cielo
moltiplicati generi d’angosce
alla tua morte rinascente, e intanto
il tuo sangue e ’l tuo pianto
eternamente sia
bagno e bevanda alla vendetta mia. (2156-63)

(One death only overcomes those who live in this world; but may heaven, as your punishment, grant multiple kinds of agony to your new-springing death, and may your blood and your tears in all eternity be the bath and drink of my vengeance.)

³⁰ Maria Martino describes the irony of this device fittingly as a disappointed “flash-forward”; see “*La Didone*, libretto e guida all’opera,” in *Francesco Cavalli: La Didone*, 73-116: 101-2. Iacovelli discusses the use of Didone’s dream as reflecting a conflict between a Neo-Platonic conception of dreams as prophetic, and a Neo-Aristotelian conception of dreams as a reworking of memories, impressions and sentiments; see “Il mito di Didone,” 175-76.

The *lieto fine* as well as the failure of the supernatural occurrences to predict the outcome of the drama encourage the audience to question the Stoic moralism that informs not only Dolce’s tragedy but also the cultural narrative which the traditional interpretation of the *Aeneid* had implanted in generations of Venetian schoolboys (and to a lesser extent, schoolgirls). If the departure of the Trojan prince does not lead to the suicide of the queen of Carthage, but rather to her wedding with the king of the Gaetuli, what happens to the notion of female chastity that spectators associated with Virgil’s poem? And what happens to their perception of Enea and Sicheo when Didone reaches the conclusion that they are not worth dying for? While returning to the former question later, I will start by discussing how Enea, as portrayed in the opera, indeed fails to meet our ideas about how a hero should act.

The character of Enea in Busenello’s drama

According to Wendy Heller, the traditional Venetian conception of Virgil’s hero, as we know it from the sixteenth-century commentaries, is still intact in Busenello’s work. The libertine Accademia degli Incogniti, of which he was a member, was particularly concerned with “the importance of civic duty over private passion,” she claims, and Enea’s conduct in Act I presents a lesson in such civic duty that “seems designed to secure his reputation as a hero and patriot.”³¹ But other commentators have reached different conclusions. Françoise Decroisette observes that Busenello, unlike Dolce and the other sixteenth-century playwrights, dares to introduce a “condemnation of Aeneas’ male cowardice,” which view is also espoused by Busenello specialist Jean-François Lattarico.³² Hendrik Schulze, furthermore, who is the only scholar to

³¹ Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 97, 104.

³² “Busenello se présente comme sceptique grinçant et libertin, portant un regard ironique sur son siècle, et il faut voir dans son interprétation de Didon [...]: le refus de la victoire du déterminisme divin, une certaine foi dans la possibilité du bonheur terrestre, et surtout ce que les autres adaptations n’avaient pas osé, la condamnation de la lâcheté masculine d’Enée.” Françoise Decroisette, “Récriture et écriture dans *La Didone* de Giovan Francesco Busenello,” in *Les langues néo-latines*, vol. 89/4, no. 295 (1995), 57-86: 78; Lattarico, *Busenello*, 214.

have dealt at length with Enea’s musical characterization by the composer Pier Francesco Cavalli, notes that his utterances always show “a certain detachment” when compared to those of the other characters.³³ Cavalli only assigns “an emotional musical language” to the hero after his encounter with Mercurio in Act III scene 6, when he is upset about not having “lived up to the ideal of his character,”³⁴ while Cavalli’s setting of his final farewell to Didone in the following scene “almost seems to describe heartlessness.”³⁵

We encounter this tendency in the text as well. Unlike Heller, I would argue that Busenello’s rejection of Dolce’s formal construction is inseparable from his rejection of its ideological foundation, and that the opera’s unsympathetic portrayal of Enea involves a critique of the moral ideals implicit in the Virgilian myth of Venice. This emerges, for example, from the poet’s skillful use of the central concept *pietà/pietade*, the translation of the Latin *pietas* associated with the Trojan hero in Virgil’s poem, which in Italian can mean both “piety” and “pity”. Ascanio, Venere and Mercurio all refer to Enea with the epithet “pio” (pious), Enea himself implying that he associates *pietà* with duty and religion rather than compassion or natural love.³⁶ When his father Anchise states that he wants to die in Troy rather than go into exile, Enea objects that leaving a father behind “non è pietà, non è dover” (is not piety, is not duty) (499); and later he declares that it is “la pietà di padre, e verso i divi / religione” (my piety as a father and devotion to the gods) (I900-I) that require him to leave Carthage. At the end of the opera, however, Didone implies that Enea’s separation of piety from pity is a sign of hypocrisy when she, in a reversal of the Virgilian epithet “pius Aeneas”, refers to her faithless lover both as “spietato Enea” (pitiless Aeneas) (I959) and as

³³ “Bei aller Differenziertheit bleibt in Eneas Gesang eine gewisse Distanz spürbar.” Hendrik Schulze, *Odysseus in Venedig: Sujetwahl und Rollenkonzeption in der venezianischen Oper des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 2004), 227.

³⁴ “Die einzige Stelle, an der Cavalli Enea eine emotionale Tonsprache zuweisen kann, die Ansprache an die Genossen in III/6, zeigt den Helden eher verstört darüber, daß er dem Ideal seines Charakters nicht nachgekommen ist.” Schulze, *Odysseus in Venedig*, 235.

³⁵ “Im Zusammenhang mit den sonstigen Anwendungen der Tonarten und Hexachordbereiche gesehen, scheint diese Vertonung fast Herzlosigkeit zu beschreiben.” Schulze, *Odysseus in Venedig*, 233.

³⁶ Ascanio: “caro padre dolce e pio” (115); Venere: “temo ch’ella, / [...] / ordica tradimenti al pio troiano” (I064-66); Mercurio: “Tu quel troiano, quel pio, quel forte” (1850).

“empio Enea” (impious Aeneas) (2299).³⁷ Likewise referring to his traditional sobriquet, she accuses him of employing “religioso manto / per mascherar di volto pio l’inganno” (the mantle of religion to mask your deception with a pious face) (2090-91), and predicts that the name “Enea” will be a byword for “tutte / l’empie brutture” (all foul and impious things) (2109-10).³⁸ In a radical departure from the Venetian Virgil tradition, Busenello suggests, in fact, that it is Didone rather than Enea who embodies *pietà* as a unity of piety and pity. This is implied in her first address to Enea’s ambassador:

Amico, arrivi in parte
ove pietà de’ peregrini alberga.
Non caderanno in discortese orecchio,
ma saranno raccolte
da sentimento pio le tue proposte. (1265-69)

(My friend, you come to a coast where pity with wanderers dwells. Your wishes shall not fall on discourteous ears but shall be received in a pious sentiment.)

In his response, the ambassador acknowledges that nature “incarnò la pietade / nel magnanimo tuo genio cortese” (embodied pity in your magnanimous and courteous spirit) (1318-19). Here he differs from Sicheo’s ghost who refers to the strictly religious use of the concept when asking his widow rhetorically: “Son questi i funerali / in cui pietà, religion risplende?” (Are these the funeral rites where piety and religion shine brightly?) (2132-33). Like Enea, Sicheo himself has no pity for Didone, however. Among her three men, only Larba turns out to respond to her compassion with real gratitude: “la vita mia di tua pietade è dono” (my life is the gift of your pity) (2378), he thanks her, and in stark contrast to Enea he decides to marry her “poiché sei de’ miei martir’ pietosa” (since you pity me in my affliction) (2385).

Far from being a work of propaganda, *La Didone* is a rewriting of the *Aeneid* in its specifically Venetian interpretation, in which the *pietas* of the Trojan hero is subjected to critical scrutiny. The first scene of the

³⁷ Cf. Busenello, *Delle ore ociose*, 419n.

³⁸ Giunone anticipates both Venere’s and Mercurio’s references to Enea as the “pious” Trojan, albeit ironically, and Didone’s final denunciation of him: “Enea, quel reo, quell’empio, / ma dirò peggio, quel troiano” (1027-28).

opera, in which Enea is divided between a group of combative, foolhardy Troiani, on the one hand, and his wife, son and father begging for his protection on the other, has no direct equivalent in Book II of the epic, which contains Aeneas’ harrowing account of the fall of Troy. In Virgil, Aeneas seizes his weapons as soon as he learns the city has fallen, though realizing that there is little purpose in trying to defend it: “Rage and wrath drive my soul headlong,” he tells Dido, “and I think how glorious it is to die in arms!”³⁹ Only much later, after he has witnessed the killing of Priam and after his mother Venus has commanded him to flee, his thoughts turn to his family, and he rushes back to their house. Here Anchises stubbornly refuses to abandon the city, but when Aeneas then decides to return to the hopeless battle, Creüsa clasps his feet, begging him to stay and defend them. The next moment a divine omen—a tongue of flame shedding a gleam on Ascanius’ temples—finally convinces Anchises that the family is meant to take flight.

Busenello split this scene into two, placing Creusa’s and Ascanio’s interventions *before* Enea joins the battle, thereby throwing a critical light on his motives for deserting his family in the first place.⁴⁰ Deaf to the prayers of his wife, Enea delivers an elaborate sermon on the body politic and the unnaturalness of the limbs (the subjects) surviving the decapitation of the body (the killing of the king):⁴¹ an extremist interpretation of the medieval metaphor for kingship, which also had its republican Venetian variant.⁴² In a moving plea on behalf of himself and his grandfather, Ascanio then presents Enea with an alternative

³⁹ “furor iraque mentem / praecipitant, pulchrumque mori succurrit in armis.” Virgil, *The Aeneid*, II.316-17.

⁴⁰ As La Via points out, however, the first line of scene I, the choral battle cry “Armi Enea, diamo all’armi” (To arms, Aeneas, let’s bring arms) (21), which recurs twice as a refrain, is based on Aeneas’ own battle cry in the *Aeneid* when he is about to abandon his family: “arma, viri, ferte arma” (Arms, men, bring arms) (II.668); see “Ai limiti dell’impossibile,” 22.

⁴¹ “Se recisa la testa, un membro vive, / contro natura ei vive. / Cor de’ sudditi è il Re; spento il re nostro, / portento è il mio respìr, mia vita è un mostro.” (85-88).

⁴² See Gasparo Contarini, *De magistratibus & republica Venetorum libri quinque* (Michaëlis Vascosani: Paris, 1543), 114-15: “Non dissimili ratione in republica Veneta summa rerum gubernatio Patricio ordini est demandata, veluti quibusdam oculis civitatis, ignobiliora officialia caeteris ex populo: sicque tamquam bene compactum corpus Veneti felicissime vivunt, cum oculi reipublicae non sibi tantum, sed universis membris prospiciant, caetera vero civitatis partes, non tantum sui habeant rationem, verum etiam hisce oculis, veluti potioribus membris reipublicae libentissime obtemperent.” (In a similar way, in the republic of Venice the greatest governmental power has been given to the patrician order, as being, so to speak, the eyes of the state, while the less noble offices are given to the remaining popular orders. Thus just like a well-ordered body, the Venetians live happily since the eyes of the republic provide for not only themselves, but also all the members, and the remaining parts of the state take into account not only themselves, but also freely obey these eyes, as the better members of the republic.) Original and translation quoted from Kallendorf, *Virgil and the Myth of Venice*, 16-17. Cf. Busenello, *Delle ore ociose*, 263n2.

concept of nature, reminding him of his affection for his family. But his father merely responds with a sententious lecture on the immortality of Stoic constancy before vanishing into the burning city with his men.⁴³ After this grim comment on traditional Venetian pedagogy, we witness its perverse effects in scene 2 when old Anchise is obliged to prevent the little Ascanio—barely able to lift the sword—from trying to emulate his father by offering his breast to the Greek soldiers, infatuated with the newly-learnt idea that the charge of unpatriotic conduct is worse than death. Enea’s encounter with Venere in scene 5 does not leave us with a more sympathetic impression of the hero: unlike Virgil’s Venus, the goddess does not persuade her son to leave the battle by evoking the image of his beloved family but by insisting that he will not be remembered as a coward. Not without a hint of disappointment, Enea then summons his family in the following scene and tells them to flee. Anchise, who hesitates, is eventually persuaded by his grandson’s tears, not by his son’s chilly argument that leaving a father behind to certain death is a breach of duty. During their flight at the end of the scene, Creusa is killed by the Greeks, and in scene 9 Enea comes back to search for her. His encounter with her ghost once more demonstrates how his obsession with honor and glory stifles basic human emotions, in contrast to how the scene is depicted in Virgil. “I was appalled, my hair stood up, and the voice clave to my throat,” the Latin Aeneas recalls touchingly;⁴⁴ and after his dead wife had vanished, the weeping widower tried three times to throw his arms about her neck in vain. Such passionate behavior is unknown to the Venetian Enea who responds to the disappearance of his wife’s ghost with a bombastic thirty-five-line speech that gives expression to his concern that Creusa will lack a grave monument appropriate to her “pietà” (732).

⁴³ Heller also notes that Enea “indoctrinates his son with Stoic precepts,” but she attributes this moral perspective to Busenello as well, though she observes elsewhere that members of the Accademia degli Incogniti “rejected religious hypocrisy and stoic deprivation.” See Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 51, 97. In general, the attitude towards Neo-Stoicism among Venetian libertines still needs to be studied.

⁴⁴ “obstipui, steteruntque comae et vox faucibus haesit.” Virgil, *The Aeneid*, IV.774.

In the *Aeneid*, when the Trojans land on the African coast after losing several of their ships in a sea storm, the anguished Aeneas reassures his men and “calms their sorrowing hearts” by talking about the restful home promised to them by the gods in Italy.⁴⁵ In the equivalent speech in Busenello’s libretto, in Act II scene 7, Enea muses at length, and with considerable enthusiasm, on his favorite topic: the immortal glory won by those who brave the strokes of fortune through hard work. As for the subsequent events, which depict the first encounter of Enea and Didone, the Venetian poet rearranged Virgil’s plot, and again the changes do not show the hero in a favorable light. In the epic, Aeneas and his faithful companion Achates are visited by Venus who shrouds them in a cloud that allows them to enter Carthage unseen. Here they witness the encounter of Dido and some of the comrades they thought lost, including Ilioneus who asks permission to restore their ships before proceeding to Italy. When Dido responds with kindness to his request, Aeneas breaks through the cloud and thanks her, and when the astonished queen then orders a banquet to be prepared for the Trojan guests, he sends Achates down to the beach to fetch Ascanius. Venus, however, who remains suspicious of Dido, lets Cupid disguise himself as Ascanius, and during the banquet the love god inbreathes the queen with a hidden fire that makes her fall in love with Aeneas.

In the opera, however, Enea plans the entry of the Trojans into Carthage in a deliberate attempt to entice Didone. In scene 8, after learning from a messenger that Anchise has been taken captive by the Carthaginians, he sends Acate (or, in Cavalli’s score, Ilioneo) off to the city as ambassador to ensure his release. Probably mindful of how movingly Ascanio pleaded on behalf of his grandfather in Act I, Enea sends the boy along as well, so he can pray for Anchise “in dolci modi / e in efficaci note” (with sweet manners and with effective notes) (1204-5). In scene 9, at Didone’s court, the ambassador reveals himself as a persuasive orator who movingly narrates the events that have led them to the African coast: an abridged version of the narration that Virgil put into the mouth of Aeneas, and which occupies Books II and III of

⁴⁵ “et dictis maerentia pectora mulcet”. Virgil, *The Aeneid*, I.197.

the *Aeneid*. Enea finally enters himself in the following scene, treating Didone to a show of exaggerated flattery, in marked contrast to the queen’s direct and simple manner, which remains closer to Virgil’s text. The hero, who in the previous act had declined to protect his wife from the slaughtering Greeks, now assures Didone that he would gladly spend his life a thousand times to buy the pleasure of beholding her for a single hour. As no mention is made of the Trojans’ intention to proceed to Italy, Enea ingratiates himself with her under false pretensions.

In light of this calculated cajolery in Act II, Enea’s abandonment of Didone in Act III appears particularly cruel, and again Busenello emphasized this effect through his manipulation of the original plot. After Mercury has accused him of forgetting his divine mission, Virgil’s Aeneas is certainly terrified and burns to flee Carthage, but he is also deeply concerned about Dido’s reaction: “Ah, what to do? With what speech now dare he approach the frenzied queen? What opening words choose first?”⁴⁶ Amid his doubts, he orders his men to prepare the departure in secret, and before he has found the right moment to approach Dido, she has guessed his intention and arrives accusing him of trying to flee behind her back. Aeneas holds “his eyes steadfast,” and with a struggle he smothers “the pain deep within his heart,” telling Dido that he is obliged to follow Jupiter’s command.⁴⁷ Refusing to accept his explanation, she responds with an angry outburst and leaves before he can answer.

Already Lodovico Dolce had given the story a twist by letting Acate suggest to Enea that they leave Carthage without telling Didone. “A me questo non sembra agevol calle” (To me that does not seem a simple path) (566), replies Dolce’s evasive prince who eagerly collects arguments for dismissing his moral qualms about deceiving the queen. Busenello’s Enea, however, needs no Acate to suggest that they leave Carthage in secret. He does not even consider how dishonest it is to abandon Didone without telling her

⁴⁶ “quid agat? quo nunc reginam ambire furentem / audeat adfatu? quae prima exordia sumat?” Virgil, *The Aeneid*, IV.283-84.

⁴⁷ “ille Jovis monitis immota tenebat / lumina et obnixus curam sub corde premebat.” Virgil, *The Aeneid*, IV.331-32.

but bids farewell *in absentia* in scene 6 with a strophic lament-lullaby, swollen with saccharine pathos, which in Cavalli’s mellifluous setting has become one of the musical highlights of the opera.⁴⁸ When the furious and desperate Didone then enters in the following scene, he responds with a rhetorical display of studied compassion. The Trojan prince, who in Act I would gladly have sacrificed his life for fame, and who in Act II claimed that he would have gladly sacrifice his life for one hour with Didone, now states that his life is not worth one teardrop of hers, and that she therefore better stop crying and forget him. After having deliberately allured her with his flatteries in Act II, he now compliments her on having deliberately “sorpreso” (overtaken) (2012) his heart and thus causing him to forget his duties, echoing Dolce’s commentary to Book IV of the *Aeneid*. And after Creusa’s ghost had told him in Act I that mourning his dead spouse should be “della tua pietade / frequente ufficio” (the frequent homage of your piety) (709-10)—a duty he fails to perform as much as Didone does—he now assures the queen of Carthage that the better part of his soul will forever be a temple consecrated to the divinity of her beautiful face. Naturally, she is outraged by these hypocritical claims, and at some point during her seventy-nine-line response he sneaks silently away from the stage, in a reversal of Virgil’s scene, in which it is Aeneas who stays while Dido runs away. No tenor hero in the history of opera has probably made a more cowardly final exit.⁴⁹

In scene 5 Mercurio had compelled Enea to leave Carthage, reprimanding him like a misbehaving Venetian schoolboy and appealing to his desire for fame and glory by asking whether he is really that strong and pious Trojan “che fu decoro ai bronzi e pompa ai marmi” (who was the grace of the bronzes and the pride

⁴⁸ For analyses of Cavalli’s musical setting of this scene, see Ellen Rosand, “Comic Contrast and Dramatic Continuity: Observations on the Form and Function of Aria in the Operas of Francesco Cavalli,” in *The Music Review* vol. 37 (1976), 92-105; 98-102; Beth L. Glixon, *Recitative in Seventeenth-Century Venetian Opera: Its Dramatic Function and Musical Language* (PhD thesis: Rutgers University, 1985), 120-31; and Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (University of California Press: Berkeley CA, 1991), 258-59. Emmanuelle Haïm selected the scene for inclusion on her album *Lamenti* (Erato, 2008, 5099951904425), on which it is sung by Topi Lehtipuu.

⁴⁹ A parallel that immediately comes to mind is Pinkerton’s exit after his aria “Addio, fiorito asil” at the end of Giacomo Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904), which in itself may be seen as a modern reimagining of the story of Dido and Aeneas. Pinkerton is clearly struck by a deeper sense of remorse than Enea, however, and he returns in the final moments of the opera in a failed attempt to prevent Butterfly’s suicide.

of the marbles) (1852). Here Giove’s messenger picks up a verbal motif, which through the drama has come to stand for Enea’s notion of immortality. “Necessitiamo i posteri a sacrarci / conspicui i bronzi, e speciosi i marmi” (We will constrain those that come after to dedicate conspicuous bronzes and massive marbles to us) (I66-67), he had told his Trojan warriors in the first scene of the opera, while he in Act II scene 7 had told them that distress and suffering “temprano il bronzo eterno a’ nomi illustri, / alzano statue alle memorie insigni” (temper bronze, eternalizing illustrious names, and raise statues for excellent commemoration) (II43-44). Already in the prologue, however, Giunone’s messenger Iride had made clear that even such monuments do not last. “Già son precipitati i bronzi e i marmi / delle memorie dardane superbe” (The bronzes and marbles commemorating the proud Dardanians are already overturned) (5-6), she sings triumphantly, undercutting Enea’s envisioning of future bronzes and marbles a few moments later. To Busenello, such ambitions were quite futile, as he made clear in one of his moral sonnets:

Nostra vita è un adesso; il ciel, l’inferno
per tradurla in un sempre io veggio pronti;
Fortuna, Amor, con orgogliose fronti,
vi pretendono ognor dominio alterno.

Eppur di marmi e di metalli io scerno
votar gl’abisso e scavernare i monti,
sul fiume dell’oblio per erger ponti,
e alzar alle chimere un tempio eterno.

Polvere ambiziosa in vetro frale,
atomo terreo alfin, ombra superba
è l'uom, che spesso ha tomba anzi al natale.

O veritate amara, o istoria acerba!
nel fango che ci dà forma mortale,
farà casa l'onor, radici l'erba.⁵⁰

(Our life is a now; I see heaven and hell ready to translate it into an always: with haughty brows, Fortune and Love forever lay claim to an alternate dominion over it. And yet I behold how the

⁵⁰ Sonnet CXIX, “Nostra vita,” in Gian Francesco Busenello, *I sonetti morali ed amorosi*, ed. Arthur Livingston (Prem. stab. Grafico C. Fabbris di S.: Venice, 1911).

depths are emptied and the mountains deprived of marbles and metals to erect bridges over the river of oblivion and to raise an eternal temple to chimaeras. Man, who often has a grave before his birth, is ultimately ambitious dust in a fragile glass, a crumb of mud, a proud shadow. O bitter truth, O cruel history! Honor will make its home and the weeds take root in the dirt that gives us mortal form.)