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Aeneid: A Depiction of Dido in Dutch Golden Age Art



Vergil's *Aeneid* has been the muse of artists for centuries, even millennia, after its publication in 19 BCE. Such was the case in the seventeenth century Netherlands, an interesting situation due to the dichotomy between the Dutch people's strict moralist faith of Calvinism, and their desire to depict risqué themes in art, such as bordello paintings and tavern scenes. As a student of classics, I sought to learn why the Dutch loved Ancient Roman and Greek myths despite its anti-Christian themes. How did such themes fit into the Dutch artistic culture of the seventeenth century when they seemed to directly contradict Dutch values? I found that the Dutch expressed their immoral desires in art as a form of catharsis: they were able to retain their

Christian identity by making something beautiful out of their demons instead of actually committing sin. Artists were allowed to depict those scenes because they placed a moralist lens on the scandalous subjects, one example being a painting of a drunken family party that had the proverb “in luxury, look out” written in Dutch in the corner.¹ In terms of the *Aeneid*, I wanted to find out what the Dutch thought of Dido, an immigrant queen and a woman of color, as shown in Dutch art. While it may seem unrelated, it is important to note that at the time, the Dutch were world leaders not only in art, but also in trade. The rise of the Dutch East India and Dutch West India companies also increased African slave trade: I argue that the Dutch people’s prejudice against people of African descent is reflected through their depictions of Dido. Therefore, their catharsis denied Dido her race, a fundamental part of her identity. As I demonstrate later in this essay, Dutch and Flemish artists illustrate Dido as a woman with pale white Nordic coloring, when she should have been brown based on her ancestry and location in the Mediterranean. With these ideas in mind, I compare descriptions of Dido and her surroundings in the *Aeneid* to *Dido and Aeneas* by Flemish artist Jan van den Hoecke. I then explain how those similarities and differences reflect onto Dutch culture.

Before comparing the paintings to the original Latin descriptions, it is necessary to summarize the findings of Shelley Haley, a professor at Hamilton College and a prolific expert on critical race theory in the ancient world. She has written several papers on the topic, one of which I will discuss in the following two paragraphs. As Haley mentions, Dido’s skin color is not explicitly described in the *Aeneid*, the only physical description of her being her hair color. However, as Haley illustrates, there is still much to infer from the *Aeneid* – and ancient Rome itself – about Dido’s appearance. Haley describes that the Romans did not think about race as people do now. According to her, the Romans referred to different skin tones as *albus*, *candidus*,

¹ *In Luxury, Look Out* (1663) by Jan Steen.

ater, *fuscus*, and *niger*, meaning white, glistening white, lusterless black (opposite of *albus*), and shining/glistening black (opposite of *candidus*), respectively (Haley 31). However, *albus* does not mean ‘white’ in the twenty-first century sense of a ‘Nordic or European coloring,’ because “the ‘developed world’ of Roman world view was definitely the world of pale-brown Mediterraneans” (Haley 31). So with that in mind, “the reference point for *albus* is pale-brown..... *ater*, *candidus*, *fuscus*, and *niger* become degrees of brownness” (Haley 31). Now, if Dido’s skin color were mentioned at all, one would not have to speculate using race terminology of Vergil’s time. However, her skin color is not mentioned once in the Aeneid, which is in itself an indication of the color:

In the character of Dido, gender, culture, and geographical location, rather than the somatic trait of skin color, are the factors construing difference. If Dido had belonged to the gene pool for which “having fair hair and skin and usually light eyes” is the norm, then it seems to me that Vergil, whose reference is *candidus* (pale brown) would have found that remarkable and would have mentioned it when we first encounter Dido.

However, he does not describe her physically at all, making it all the more plausible that Vergil conceived of Dido as what I call the “beautiful norm”: southern Mediterranean and Semitic women who were *candidae*, with black hair, pale brown skin, and dark eyes.

(Haley 37)

As Haley points out, Vergil would have found it astonishing if Dido had Nordic white skin and blond hair, and as a result he would have described such a notable difference; however, he wrote no such description. Therefore, Dido’s skin color must have appeared the same as other women at the time – at the lightest, she was pale brown.

Now, her hair – it is likely that Dido’s hair was darker than the blond it is described as in the *Aeneid*. Vergil describes Dido’s hair once at the end of Book 4 when she sees that Aeneas has left the port: *terque quaterque manu pectus percussa decorum flaventisque abscissa comas* (Vergil 4.589-90).² At this moment in the *Aeneid*, Dido’s hair is blond, which is only naturally possible for someone of European descent. However, as Haley points out, diction makes it clear that her hair was not always that way:

“Translators render *flaventis* as “golden” or “yellow,” but the word is a participial adjective from the verb “*flaveo*,” “to be yellow,” so that in line 590 there is a sense that Dido’s hair has just become yellow.” (Haley 39)

Thus, her hair must have been darker before the ritual. The reason why Haley believes Dido had her hair dyed is because Dido turned to an indigenous African priestess to complete rituals in order to cope with Aeneas’ impending departure (Haley 38, Vergil 4.483). According to Haley:

“One important aspect of ritual in some traditional African religions involves dousing the worshippers and presiders with a yellow mud made from ochre. I suggest also that Dido had been doused with a similar mud, hence the description of her as having yellow hair (*flaventis abscissa comas*, 1.590).” (Haley 38-39)

Therefore, it is likely that Dido’s hair turned yellow because of the African ritual she took part in. Vergil had knowledge of African customs, so it is likely that he was aware of this one and deliberately used *flaventis* to subtly demonstrate such knowledge. (Haley 37) Thus, Dido must have had naturally dark hair.

Now that I have explained Dido’s appearance, I will present some background on the information on the artist that painted Dido and Aeneas, which will inform my analysis of the

² she struck her lovely chest three and four times with her hand, she tore her yellowing hair

painting. Not much is known about van den Hoecke, as he was a minor Flemish artist and tapestry maker. However, art historians know that he mainly painted portraits and history paintings, and was a pupil of Rubens, who had a classical style and followed Caravaggio; naturally, van den Hoecke's own style derived from his master's.³ After he spent time in Rubens' studio, van den Hoecke lived in Italy from 1635-1646, studying the Italian masters and further developing his style. This period of his life influenced him in his later years. Even though he made *Dido and Aeneas* before his trip to Italy, or perhaps in his first year there, it is clear that he has always been interested in classical themes. However, it is unclear how deep his interest goes because it is not known whether he knew Latin. If he knew the language, he would have been able to read the *Aeneid* the way it was written, and therefore could have depicted Dido accurately. There is one painting of his called *Amor vincit omnia*, which may indicate that he knew Latin, but most painting titles that people use today are different from what they are called when they are created. If van den Hoecke knew Latin, it is possible that he painted *Dido and Aeneas* and used the original Latin as a source, but it is also possible that he read an English translation or read their story in an emblem book.⁴ Additionally, if he were classically educated, he would have known Dido's true hair color was dark and that her skin was brown. Regardless, van den Hoecke had a deep interest in both the classics and the classical style of painting.

Now that van den Hoecke's artistic background is laid out, it is time to discuss his painting *Dido and Aeneas* (circa 1630-1635). Even though Dido is the focus of this essay, it is imperative to describe the whole painting and see how accurate it is to the Latin so that we have a full analysis. The foreground of the painting shows Aeneas helping Dido off a horse, and the

³ The term 'history painting' includes not only paintings of historical events, but also of Greek and Roman mythology.

⁴ Painters across Europe used emblem books to incorporate symbols into their paintings and add meaning. For example, dogs represented loyalty, and pipes and tankards represented sin (Westermann). Some emblem books, such as Karel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck* included a summary of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I am not sure if there is an emblem book that contains a summary of the *Aeneid* (as I cannot read Dutch and could not find one).

background shows men hunting stags with a storm looming ahead. These are the lines from the *Aeneid* that match the painting:

*alia de parte patentis / transmittunt cursu campos atque agmina cervi / pulverulenta fuga
glomerant montisque relinquunt. / at puer Ascanius mediis in vallibus acri / gaudet equo
iamque hos cursu, iam praeterit illos, / spumantemque dari pecora inter inertia votis /
optat aprum, aut fulvum descendere monte leonem. / Interea magno misceri murmure
caelum / Incipit, insequitur commixta grandine nimbus / Et Tyrii comites passim et
Troiana iuventus / Dardaniusque nepos Veneris diversa per agros / Tecta metu petiere;
ruunt de montibus amnes. / Speluncam Dido dux et Troianus eandem / deveniunt. (Vergil
4.151-66)⁵*

It is interesting that the foreground and focus of this painting is the most inaccurate to the Latin. As shown by the quote above, Dido's physical appearance is not mentioned in this scene. But drawing from Haley's article, Dido is not as white as the woman depicted in the painting, nor at this point in the story does she have yellow hair. When Dido enters the cave with Aeneas, her hair is most likely black or dark brown like the hair color of most Mediterranean people and Semites at the time. Dido's hair turns yellow long after they have solidified their relationship in the cave and shortly before Aeneas leaves her. Therefore, the way van den Hoecke painted Dido's hair is inaccurate to her true hair color at that point in the story. Additionally, Vergil does not write that Aeneas helped Dido get off her horse when the storm arrived, though it may seem plausible. The most incredible part of the painting is the two naked children with wings. One sits

⁵ Deer from another refuge / Sped off in crowding ranks across the bare plain, / In a dusty panic to escape the mountain. / The boy Ascanius, keen-horsed, keen rider, / Kept racing past them on the valley floor, / wanting a tawny lion from the mountain / Or a foam-mouthed boar among so many tame things. / But a racket and now a tumult now erupted / From the sky; a storm cloud shot in, full of hail, / Scattering the trojans and their Tyrian escorts / And Venus' Trojan grandson through the fields / Toward urgent shelter. Streams rushed from the hillsides. / The Trojan lord and Dido found the same cave. (Ruden 4.151-66)

on a horse, and the other flies directly above Dido's head. If we are to understand such children as angels in the painting, they do not belong to the Roman pantheon of gods. Another possibility is that the babies are manifestations of Cupid, though he is only one god. But, the baby on the horse is Ascanius, whom Cupid disguised himself as in Book 1. But if he is Ascanius, he is not chasing deer as he does in the *Aeneid*. Nevertheless, these two figures are not in the Latin text. The only textually accurate part about the painting is the background. Just as in the *Aeneid*, deer run away from the men chasing them – one man is clearly visible on the left side of the painting, and the other's only visible part is the tail end of his horse. The rest of his body and the horse fall off the left side of the painting.

So, if the background of the painting is accurate, why did van den Hoecke make the foreground so different from the *Aeneid*? It was not difficult to obtain brown colors at the time. Open market paintings were made mostly brown because the color was so inexpensive, not to mention that the upper right part of the painting is mostly brown, and so is the child's horse. Thus, if the artist had the means to paint it accurately, why did van den Hoecke make this stylistic choice? There is no way to know for sure, but it is possible to surmise a few things. The artist was clearly interested in classics. He only painted a few mythological paintings, but he spent considerable time in the studio of Rubens, who did paint a lot of them. Van den Hoecke was also able to style the background of his painting directly as the Latin instructed. Perhaps the addition of the winged children was a nod to Cupid to show Aeneas and Dido's budding love, but there is no explanation for why Dido is lighter in skin tone than she should be. To be fair, van den Hoecke did not have a modern understanding of race. He may not have known the African customs that involved dyeing one's hair – it could be unintentional ignorance. However, he did live in a time and place where slave trade was on the rise. Van den Hoecke lived just south of the

Northern Netherlands in Flanders. There was close contact between the Flemish and Dutch, especially artists traveling back and forth from Flanders to Amsterdam and Utrecht and even Italy, where they had firsthand contact with Mediterranean inhabitants. It was entirely possible that van den Hoecke encountered African slaves and traveling artists since he was a member of Rubens' studio. Also, if he knew anything about the *Aeneid*, which he clearly did as shown by the painting's background, he knew Dido was from Tyre and immigrated to North Africa. Thus, he would have known that she was a brown woman at the very least.

While van den Hoecke did whitewash Dido, it is important to note that he was not the only one. In the Dutch and Flemish tradition, paintings such as Cornelis Troost's *Aeneas und Dido brecken zur Jagd auf*, Gerard Hoet the Elder's *Aenas und Ascanius beim Festmahl der Dido*, and Thomas Willeboirts Bosschaert's *Dido and Aeneas in the Cave* do the same thing to varying degrees. There are only a few known paintings of people of color in the seventeenth century Dutch catalogue at all, due to their racist society as demonstrated by their use of African slaves. But Dido was whitewashed by artists from other countries, such as Italian artists who should have had a better understanding of Mediterranean coloring. Though race is a construct, it has real societal impacts. Therefore, by erasing one's race, one strips away people of color's humanity. Dido cannot be Dido without her race - by making her a Nordic white woman, it takes away her history in Tyre and her founding of Carthage in North Africa - her place in the world. This paper seeks not to condemn van den Hoecke nor any Flemish, Dutch, or other artists, but to call attention to the rampant erasure of people of color in Netherlandish art of the seventeenth century, and in turn, the erasure of people of color from narratives in antiquity.⁶

⁶ However, that is not to say that black and brown people were completely absent from Dutch art. Artists such as Frans Post painted the Black people of Brazil in his landscape paintings, but he made them more part of the landscape than the principal figures, even then erasing their importance.

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