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The Death of Dido

Ferdinand Bol
(Dordrecht 1616 – 1680 Amsterdam)

ca. 1668–69

oil on canvas

169 x 167.5 cm Frame: 196 x 197 x 11.5 cm (77
3/16 x 77 9/16 x 4 1/2 in.)

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With theatrical bravura, Ferdinand Bol depicted the climax of one of the most tragic love stories in classical literature, recounted in the fourth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*.^[1] Dido, the beautiful queen of Carthage, and Aeneas, the Trojan prince who had survived the ravages of his besieged city, fell deeply in love after the shipwrecked hero landed on Carthage's shore.^[2] Their love, however, was doomed from the beginning, for Aeneas was destined to be the founder of Rome, and his fortunes lay elsewhere. When the gods reminded the prince of his important duty, he had no choice but to leave. Grief-stricken by Aeneas's departure and mortified at having broken her oath of faithfulness to her dead husband, Sychaeus, the ruined queen burned all her lover's possessions, climbed onto the pyre, pierced herself with Aeneas's sword, and died.

Bol poignantly rendered the last moments of Dido's life against the backdrop of a monumental column, partially covered by a billowing, velvet curtain. On a sumptuous carpet, the dying queen, supported by the old nurse Barce, makes one last effort to look into the eyes of her younger sister Anna, who raises her right arm in despair as she tries to hold Dido's gaze. At the far right, Anna's maid Melinda quietly holds a handkerchief to her eyes in a moment of private grief. Dido's lopsided crown, her broken pearl necklace, and the way her dress has slipped down to reveal her right breast and the gaping hole of the mortal wound in her chest all convey a fallen woman at her darkest hour. Aeneas's sword lies glistening in the foreground, while smoke rises from an urn alluding to the pyre on which Dido will be cremated. Aeneas's departing ship, seen in the far left distance, provides a painful reminder of the cause of this tragedy.

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. Michel Dorigny, after Simon Vouet, *Death of Dido*, 1643, etching and engraving, 355 x 260 mm, British Museum, London, inv. no. 1841,1211.39.66, © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Bol emphasized the interaction between the dying queen and her inconsolable sister through their compositional prominence and their strongly highlighted jewels and dresses. Not only does Anna express the desperate sentiment of irretrievable loss as she leans toward Dido, but her rosy complexion, red dress, and shimmering golden mantle offer a poignant contrast to Dido's deathly pale skin and ashen lips, bloodstained silver dress, and white ermine robe. Barce and Melinda, on the other hand, take on secondary roles. Barce's face is almost entirely obscured in shadow while Melinda is placed at the far right of the composition, physically separated from the central protagonists.

Although other scenes from the *Aeneid* were relatively common in Dutch painting, including in Bol's own oeuvre, the subject of Dido's death gained popularity only in the second half of the seventeenth century.^[3] Bol looked closely at the composition of a 1643 engraving by Michel Dorigny (1617–65) after the painting *Death of Dido* by Simon Vouet (1590–1649) (**fig 1**), and modeled the setting after the French prototype.^[4] Bol also lifted a number of details from Dorigny's print, such as Dido's pose, her dress revealing her proper right breast, the (mirrored) figure of Barce, the creased carpet, the urn on the right, the column and curtain in the right background, and the fleet in the left background.

The striking eye contact between Dido and Anna in Bol's dramatic interpretation of this scene, however, appears to have been derived from a later, nonpictorial source: the 1668 play *Didoos Doot* (Dido's Death), written by the Amsterdam playwright Andries Pels (1631–81).^[5] In Dorigny's print, which followed Virgil's *Aeneid*, there is no eye contact between Anna, who leans on her sister's lap as she dries her tears with her dress, and Dido. In Pels's dramatic reenactment of the classical drama, he deviates from Virgil on precisely this aspect, writing explicitly that Anna cries out one final request: "Oh Dido, Dido, look at your sister once more!"^[6]

By 1668, Bol belonged to the artistic elite of Amsterdam and would have known Pels, a fellow proponent of the classicist style. It is thus likely that Bol saw Pels's *Didoos Doot* at the famous Amsterdam Schouwburg, which had reopened in 1665 after a large-scale renovation, and based the interaction between the sisters in his painting on the theatrical performance.^[7] The painting style of *Death of Dido* is consistent with Bol's monumental treatment of classical history painting in the 1660s. He must have executed this work shortly after Pels's play was first performed, and certainly by 1669, the year in which he completed his last dated painting.^[8]

Like most stories from classical antiquity, the episode of Dido's suicide had a didactic and moralizing connotation in the Dutch Republic. In Pels's dedication, addressed to the burgomaster and the Amsterdam city council, he wrote that he intended his play not only as an entertainment for the citizens but also as a tool for moral instruction.^[9]



After all, as the inscription under the frontispiece admonishes, “unlawful and impetuous love will always be punished.”^[9] Dido was thus judged much more harshly than was Lucretia, her virtuous counterpart whose rape and subsequent suicide had also become popular subjects in theater and the visual arts in the 1660s.^[10] Unlike Lucretia, who died to preserve her honor, Dido tarnished her reputation the moment she took up with Aeneas, dishonoring the memory of her deceased husband.

Given the large scale of the painting and Bol’s powerful foreshortening of Dido’s body, it is likely that *Death of Dido* originally hung high on a wall in a grand room. Bol’s monumental depiction of this tragic scene not only would have been prestigious and aesthetically pleasing to its original patron, but also would have served as a reminder to act rationally and morally at all times. After all, as Dido’s example blatantly shows, rash and impassioned acts can lead to catastrophe.

- Ilona van Tuinen, 2017

Endnotes

1. An expanded essay on this painting by the author, entitled “The Tragic Gaze: Ferdinand Bol, *The Death of Dido*, and Late Seventeenth-Century Theatre,” can be found in *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck: New Research*, ed. Stephanie S. Dickey (Zwolle, 2017), 98–113.
2. For an English translation of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, see, for instance, the one by Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1983). Book IV, “The Passion of the Queen,” appears on pages 95–121 (lines 1–705). The love story between Dido and Aeneas makes up the entirety of the fourth book, ending with Dido’s tragic death in lines 645–705.
3. For an excellent overview of depictions of Dido’s death and other episodes from the *Aeneid* in Dutch painting, see Eric Jan Sluijter, “Onderwerpen uit de *Aeneis* in de Noordnederlandse schilderkunst van de zeventiende en eerste helft achttiende eeuw,” *Hermeneus: Tijdschrift voor antieke cultuur* 54 (1982): 299–316. As for scenes from the *Aeneid* in Bol’s own oeuvre, in 1647, Bol painted the pendants *Aeneas Hunting*, now at Ranger’s House in London, and *Dido Hunting*, currently in the Bergsten Collection in Stockholm. See Albert Blankert, *Ferdinand Bol (1616–1680): Rembrandt’s Pupil* (Doornspijk, 1982), 99–100, nos. 22–23. In the early 1660s, Bol executed a monumental *Aeneas Receiving a New Set of Armor at the Recommendation of Venus in Vulcan’s Forge*, more than twice the size of the present painting, for the rich widow Jacoba Lampsins in Utrecht. Today, it hangs in the Peace Palace in The Hague, on loan from the Rijksmuseum. See Margriet van Eikema Hommes, *Art and Allegiance in the Dutch Golden Age: The Ambitions of a Wealthy Widow in a Painted Chamber by Ferdinand Bol* (Amsterdam, 2012).
4. The print by Michel Dorigny after Simon Vouet measures 355 x 260 mm and was executed in 1643. Simon Vouet’s painting *Death of Dido*, 1642–43, oil on canvas, 215 x 117 cm, is in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dole, France, inv. no. MJ 87-520.
5. Andries Pels, *Didoos Doot* (Amsterdam, 1668). The play appears to have been popular: between 1668 and 1728, it was reprinted six times. See Ceneton, the Leiden University database of Dutch theater plays, edited by A.J.E. Harmsen. Gerard de Lairese (1640–1711) designed a series of six etchings for the publication of the play. Lairese’s etching of the *Death of Dido*—which, unlike Bol’s painting, includes all seven figures featured in the final scene of Pels’s play and depicts the moment when Dido’s soul is transferred to heaven—is the earliest dated depiction of this scene by a Dutch artist. Its composition determined the pictorial tradition for the rest of the seventeenth century. For Lairese’s six illustrations for the play, see Alain Roy, *Gérard de Lairese, 1640–1711* (Paris, 1992), 430–32, nos. G 30–35. The *Death of Dido* is G 34. For the paintings inspired by Lairese’s example, see, for instance, Gerard Hoet, *Death of Dido*, ca. 1680–1700, oil on canvas, 175 x 150 cm, wall decoration at Kasteel Slangenburgh in Doetinchem, the Netherlands; Nicolaes Berchem, *Death of Dido*, 1678, oil on canvas, Liechtenstein Collection, Vaduz.
6. Andries Pels, *Didoos Doot* (Amsterdam, 1668), 55: “Ach Dido! Dido! zie u zuster noch eens aan.”

Meanwhile, Barce aids Anna in bracing a swooning Dido. Melinda, who does not appear in the classical narrative, is saddened by Anna's state and attempts to comfort her with reassuring words. In the *Aeneid*, Anna, the only person Virgil explicitly mentions as being at Dido's deathbed, takes her sister onto her lap and attempts to stop the bleeding with her dress. Virgil's work had been accessible through the Dutch translations of Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679). In 1642, Vondel published the translation of Ovid's *Heroines*, which included Dido's lamenting letter to Aeneas. In 1646, he published the first comprehensive Dutch Virgil translation in prose, followed by a translation in verse in 1660. See J.F.M. Sterck, ed., *De werken van J. van den Vondel* (Amsterdam, 1927–37), vol. 6.

7. On the renovation of the Amsterdam Schouwburg, see Rick Elenbaas, “De verbouwing van de Amsterdamse Schouwburg (1663–1665) in relatie tot het repertoire, het publiek en de toneelorganisatie,” *De zeventiende eeuw* 20 (2004): 285–98.
8. Compare the *Death of Dido*, for instance, to Bol's similarly majestic composition of *Aeneas with Latinus*, ca. 1661–63, oil on canvas, 218 x 232 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. The *Death of Dido* emerged from a private collection in 2007 and was sold at public auction at Nagel, Stuttgart, 21 March 2007, no. 551, where Werner Sumowski first attributed the painting to Bol. Albert Blankert confirmed this attribution in a note to Jack Kilgore in late 2007. The date ca. 1668–69 corresponds to Blankert's dating of the painting to the late 1660s. Sumowski dated the painting to the early 1660s on the basis of stylistic similarities with Bol's 1663 *Allegory of Education* at the Rijksmuseum, oil on canvas, 208 x 179 cm, inv. no. SK-A-46.
9. Andries Pels, *Didoos Doot* (Amsterdam, 1668), A5: “[m]ijn voornaamste oogwit [is] geweest ‘t vermaak van uwe Burgeren, en ‘t nut van uwe Godshuizen [literally: churches].”
10. Andries Pels, *Didoos Doot* (Amsterdam, 1668), frontispiece, designed by Gerard de Lairese: “Verbode en Dartle Min ontvluhte nooit zyn Straf.”
11. For a depiction of *Death of Lucretia* by Frans van Mieris (1635–81) in The Leiden Collection, see the entry by Quentin Buvelot in this catalogue. For a depiction of *Lucretia* by Caspar Netscher (ca. 1639–1684) in The Leiden Collection, see the entry by Marjorie E. Wieseman in this catalogue. For an overview of the complex interpretations surrounding Lucretia, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Rembrandt, *Lucretia*, 1664,” in *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century* (Washington, 1995), 280–87. In the Dutch Republic, Lucretia was often regarded as a symbol of patriotism. After all, her death led to the institution of the Roman Republic. The Dutch felt a close parallel between the foundations of Rome and their own republic. Wheelock also discusses the tension between Lucretia's preservation of honor and her breach of Christian morality in the act of suicide, a tension that is noticeable in Rembrandt's painting.

Provenance



- Stumm-Halberg Collection, Neunkirchen, Saar, Germany, by 1903 (sale, Peretz, Saarbrücken, Germany, 1987).
- Private collection (sale, Nagel, Stuttgart, 21 March 2007, no. 551 [to Richard Herner and Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc.]).
- [Richard Herner, London, and Jack Kilgore & Co., Inc., New York.]
- From whom purchased by the present owner in 2007.

Exhibition History

- Aarhus, ARoS, “Mythologies: The Beginning and End of Civilizations,” 14 April–18 October 2020 [lent by present owner].

References

- Van Tuinen, Ilona. “The Tragic Gaze: Ferdinand Bol, *The Death of Dido*, and Late Seventeenth-Century Theatre.” In *Ferdinand Bol and Govert Flinck: New Research*. Edited by Stephanie S. Dickey, 98–113. Zwolle, 2017.
- Høyersten, Erlend. *Mythologies: The Beginning and End of Civilizations*. Exh. cat. Aarhus, ARoS. Aarhus, 2020, 199, ill.