

Dido is generally considered a bad interpreter, or rather, an “interested misreader” (Hexter 1999: 67). After all, she hears Aeneas’ tale of the fall of Troy and his subsequent wanderings, in which he mentions multiple divine signs directing him to found a new homeland in Italy, and yet, as Hexter puts it (*ibid.*), “The words of the text notwithstanding, Dido exercises her freedom, a terrible freedom, to make false inferences: that having been dissatisfied to date, Aeneas might stay with her, rather than move on, defying or ignoring oracular and prophetic pronouncements.” Without attempting to justify Dido as a character (this paper seeks to identify thought-processes, not to vindicate or condemn), I would like to suggest that this is *not* an illogical inference, nor perhaps even an incorrect one, given the messages that book-end Aeneas’ narration. I will discuss how these may affect the current import (or lack thereof) that Dido assigns to the oracles within the story, why Aeneas may frame his story in this way, and how Vergil uses Dido and Aeneas’ communication to tell the reader “something *about* interpretation” (O’Hara 1993).

When he and Dido first meet, Aeneas never mentions Italy at all—much less as his divinely-mandated future homeland. Rather, upon emerging from the cloud he thanks her effusively (for thirteen lines, 1.597-610) for her generous offer of a home in Carthage (*urbe, domo socias* 1.600), without declining it (contrast *Od.* 7.330-3) or accepting her *other* offer, to help them should they wish to sail on to Latium, which Ilioneus had told her was “where they were going” (*hic cursus fuit* 1.534—no mention of fate or oracles). It is clear from Dido’s response to Aeneas’ thanks that she thinks the Trojans have finally found the place they were meant to settle, just as she did: *me quoque per multos similis fortuna labores/ iactatam hac demum voluit consistere terra* (1.628-9). It is with this sentiment—which is followed by no contradictory response from Aeneas—that they enter the palace to feast. As Dido listens to Aeneas’ story, then, she already has an idea of how it will turn out—with a happy ending in Carthage. I would like to suggest that the “knowledge” of this ending may affect the import that she assigns to the events and oracles subsequently narrated by Aeneas. This is not, *pace* Hexter, a “terrible freedom” to distort willfully, but rather a natural readerly process; expectation guides interpretation. Moreover, Aeneas concludes his tale with reproachful remarks on the failure of prophets to warn him of the devastating loss of Anchises (*nec vates Helenus, cum multa horrenda moneret,/ hos mihi praedixit luctus, non dira Celaeno* 3.712-3). It would not be unreasonable for Dido to think he was disillusioned with prophecy and skeptical of its reliability—this may be exactly the message he intends to convey. I point to evidence that worn out (*fessum* 3.710) Aeneas, smitten with the appealingly “move-in ready” city of Carthage (*o fortunati*, 1.437) and its stunning queen (*forma pulcherrima Dido*, 1.496, focalized through Aeneas), downplays his current commitment to his mission, both when he introduces himself to Dido, and as he concludes the tale of his wanderings, because his commitment is in fact seriously flagging just he comes upon what looks like a better option.