THE MARKS OF THE HIDDEN FLAME: THREE FACES
OF DIDO IN CURIAL E GÜELFA

Abstract

Curial e Güelfa, a fifteenth century Catalan chivalresque novel whose authorship is unknown, presents the story of two lovers: a widowed young noblewoman named Güelfa who falls in love with Curial, a page in her brother’s household. The love story is configured to echo the tale of Dido and Aeneas. The character of Güelfa alone does not, however, present a complete portrait of Dido. Other dimensions to this portrait are provided by two important secondary female characters, Laquesis and Camar. The Laquesis episodes illustrate several important characteristics of Dido: she rejects other suitors, and attempts to prevent Curial’s further travels in search of his destiny. Camar presents those same characteristics, and then some: she remains true to her love for Curial, rejecting a royal suitor, and eventually commits suicide, invoking Dido explicitly, to keep that faith. Initially Güelfa, and then Laquesis, represent the classical, Virgilian Dido; Camar completes the tale, evoking details of the Dido/Aeneas myth through Ovid, Augustine and Dante, creating a late medieval fully-realized portrait of the Carthaginian queen.

The anonymous fifteenth-century Catalan chivalresque novel Curial e Güelfa has occasioned varying critical reactions since its discovery a century ago, from Menéndez y Pelayo’s dismissal of “la afectación y mal gusto de muchos trozos y [el] poco interés de la narración” (397) to the admiration of Francisco Rico for its reworking of Petrarch (89–90). Curial e Güelfa has, unfortunately, suffered over the years from a tendency on the part of scholars to compare it unflatteringly to the other great Catalan novel of the fifteenth century, Tirant lo Blanc. More recently, however, critics have acknowledged its worth and have turned their attention to more careful study of the text itself, and particularly to its jumbled, confusing but rich evocation of fifteenth century European culture (Lola Badia, De Bernat Metge a Joan Rós de Corella; Anton Espadaler, Una reina per a Curial, Joan Bastardas, “El suicidi literari de Camar”; Montserrat Piera, El género en Curial e Güelfa, etc).

Of special interest has been the wealth of material adapted and reworked from classical and medieval sources. Among these many sources, the anonymous author of Curial e Güelfa surely knew Ovid; moreover, he also knew works that incorporated Ovidian intertexts, for instance Boccaccio’s Decameron and Fiammetta.

In a recent study, Montserrat Piera and I have examined the theme of metamorphosis in Curial e Güelfa, focusing specifically on the tale of Pygmalion and Galatea (Piera and Rogers 1992, 335–38). But while there is much more to be gleaned from the Metamorphoses that may illuminate Curial e Güelfa more clearly, other Ovidian works, particularly the Heroides, can also shed light on some of the puzzles still to be solved regarding Curial.
e Güelfa, particularly to do with questions of intertextuality. In this study I examine the case of Dido, the Carthaginian queen who fell in love with Aeneas after he fled Troy, endangering his destiny as the founder of Rome.

The main characters of Curial e Güelfa are, of course, Güelfa and Curial. She is a beautiful young noblewoman, the widow of the Duke of Milan. He is the young man she loves, a page in the household of her brother, the Marquis of Montferrat. Güelfa has chosen Curial not merely as the object of her affections, but also as an improvement project. She lavishes her attention and her considerable resources on transforming Curial into a knight worthy of her love.

Besides Güelfa, however, there are two other important female characters: Laquesis and Camar. Laquesis is introduced in book one, as the sister of the Duchess of Austria, whose honor Curial defends in one of his first knightly contests. Naturally, he is victorious, and the women’s father, the Duke of Bavaria, offers Curial his second daughter, Laquesis, in marriage as a reward for restoring the Duchess’ honor and saving her life. Laquesis falls in love with Curial and becomes a force to be reckoned with in his life throughout the first two books of the novel.

Camar appears only in book three. She is young Muslim woman whom Curial meets after becoming a slave in Tunis. Camar is Curial’s owner’s daughter, a beautiful and accomplished young woman. Camar falls in love with Curial, too, and cannot therefore bring herself to marry the king, to whom her father has promised her. Camar first wounds herself with a knife, effectively delaying the moment when she must marry the king. After a time, she recovers somewhat, but it soon becomes clear that she must either marry the king or die for refusing him. For love of Curial, she chooses suicide, and after revealing to him where her father’s treasure is hidden, she throws herself from a high window to her death.

All three of these women reflect Dido, in one way or another. But which Dido? Or perhaps a better question is: whose Dido?

Howard Jacobson’s comparison of Virgil’s Dido with Ovid’s leads him to favor the former as a more fully realized literary model, precisely because the presence of Aeneas in it provides a “balance” that is “completely lost” in the Heroides (91). To quote Jacobson: “Ovid simply cannot work himself into the tragedy of Aeneas, but understands and sympathizes with Dido’s plight. Dido’s tragedy, however, loses more than half its meaning without Aeneas’... to hear Dido’s side alone and all at once is tedious and shallow” (91).

Linda S. Kauffman, however, argues in Discourses of Desire that the letters of Ovid’s heroines were intended to be read collectively as well as individually: “One distinctive trait of the Heroides is a kind of doubleness: one reads it simultaneously as a series of individual letters and as a coherent text with a unified form, theme and structure.” (31). Thus, Dido’s “balance” – the lack of which Jacobson decries – is actually to be found