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A Brief Reflection on the Death of Dido, with an Acrostic Coda

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The death *tableau* of the Carthaginian queen Dido is the final scene of Book IV (verses 693–705) of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the closing panel of the first third of the epic.[1] While commentators and critics have reflected on many of the facets of the poet's unforgettable coda to his hero's momentous sojourn in the nascent Carthage, one detail has proven to be perennially perplexing for some: the description of the goddess Juno as "omnipotent" as she attends to the relief of the suffering queen by securing her swift demise through the agency of Iris:

Tum Iuno omnipotens longum miserata dolorem
difficilisque obitus Irim demisit Olympo (IV, 693–694)[2]

Our study will focus on the significance of Virgil's characterization of Juno as *omnipotens* in the context of the dispatching of her rainbow avatar to snip a lock of Dido's hair as an offering to the infernal Proserpina, with particular reference to how the release of the Carthaginian queen from her death agonies is not merely an immediate act of mercy and relief for the grievously wounded monarch, but, more significantly, the mechanism by which the angry, vengeful goddess will work untold harm and horror against her Trojan enemies.[3] In short, Juno's action

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1 On this signal passage see especially BUSCAROLI 1932; PEASE 1935; AUSTIN 1955, MACLENNAN 2007; O'HARA 2011, and FRATANTUONO – SMITH 2022, *ad loc*.; note also the sober, comprehensive survey of CARTAULT 1926, 336–339. The echoes in this closing scene of earlier Virgilian Dido passages are studied by PUTNAM 2014. I am grateful to the suggestions and corrections of the anonymous referees that improved this study; all errors that remain are my own.

2 All quotes from Virgil's *Aeneid* are taken from CONTE 2019.

3 There are several other layers of interpretation for a dozen and one of the most pregnant verses in the epic. On connections of this passage to the Orpheus and Eurydice epyllion of the close of *Georgics* IV and the Orphic, eschatological mystery of *Aeneid* VI, see RAABE 1974, 149–152. Note also PHILLIPS 1977, with attention to the relevance of Juno's various functions and associations to the narrative of Dido's demise.

at the close of *Aeneid* IV will obtain for the wrathful immortal nothing less than the ruinous future of the wars of the children of Aeneas against Carthage, as well as the long history of violence that will mark the life of the sons of the Trojans and their Roman progeny from the arrival of Aeneas in Italy straight through many centuries of violence to the civil wars of Virgil's own lifetime.[4] Lastly, we shall consider how ultimately Rome – destined to be under Juno's protection – will prevail in its struggle against its north African rival.

The scene is Dido's palace at Carthage, in the wake of the botched suicide attempt of the queen that has left her in mortal agony.[5] The omnipotent Juno takes pity on the torturous end of Carthage's ruler, and she sends her colorful messenger Iris to snip a lock of the queen's golden hair as an offering for Dis.[6] Iris' mission is swiftly accomplished, and Dido's life recedes into the winds.[7] "Omnipotent Juno" has accomplished her act of pity for the ruler of her favorite city.[8] A rainbow, one might say, has appeared after a tempest.[9] Certainly divinity has intervened in the face of mortality.[10]

The passage under consideration is the first of but two in the epic where Juno is accorded the epithet *omnipotens* of supreme power; the second occurs at VII, 428 *ipsa palam fari omnipotens Saturnia iussit*, where the disguised fury Allecto addresses Turnus as she follows the Junonian admonition to engender the war in Italy between Aeneas' Trojans and Turnus' Rutulians: Allecto presents her credentials to Turnus.[11] Iris serves her divine mistress in Book IV; Allecto will fulfill

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4 For the Virgilian depiction of Carthage, note in particular GIUSTI 2018.

5 On how Dido's suicide has affinities with the similarly failed initial stabbing effort of the doomed triumvir Mark Antony see FRATANTUONO 2020.

6 This is Iris' first appearance in the epic; her name is prominent at mid-verse at IV, 694. "A visitant surrounded by beauty and colour …" (TILLY 1968, *ad loc.*); see further KUHN 1971, 76–83; SMITH 2005, 44–48, and FRATANTUONO 2013. Quintus Smyrnaeus has Athena send Iris to Aeolus to help to orchestrate the wrecking of the Greek fleet at *Posthomerica* XIV, 467ff. Juno's Iris and not Jupiter's Mercury will serve duty as a quasi-psychopomp to see to the death that will secure the curse on the Aeneadae.

7 "Le lecteur n'attendait pas ces derniers développements: avec les v. 667–671, 672–687 tout semblait conclu; les scènes d'agonie sont étrangères aux stylisations de l'épopée comme de la tragédie. Le pathétique provient ici de la peinture d'efforts pénibles, incertains dans leur visée, toujours décevants, bien représentatifs de la vie déchirée de la pauvre Didon" (PERRET 1977, *ad loc.*). We may compare the epitaph composed for the queen by the anonymous Norman cleric who wrote the *Roman d'Enéas*: *Dydo qui por amor s'occist; / onques ne fu meilleur païene / s'elle n'eüst amor soutaine, / mais elle ama trop follement, / savoirs ne li valut neant* (2225–2229 Petit).

8 On the depiction of Dido as a political leader, note MULLER 2022, 19ff.

9 So KETTERER 1992.

10 OLIVER 1920 offers a sound introduction to the trope.

11 For *omnipotens* (23x in the epic) as an epic epithet see MOSKALEW 1982, 81. It is usually applied to Jupiter in the epic (cf. I, 60; III, 251; VI, 592; VII, 141; 770; VIII, 398; X, 100; XII, 178); note XI, 789–790, where Arruns invokes his patron Soractean Apollo as *pater*

the all-powerful goddess' charge in VII. The progression from Iris to Allecto is a decidedly grim advance from light to dark, from the celestial to the infernal.[12] Herein we see a reflection of how Book VII will witness the commencement of war, while the tensions and hazards of Book IV would seem to come to a quiet, peaceful (however tragic) end in colorful Iris' action.[13]

The key adjective *omnipotens* of Juno has been subject to much criticism and debate, some of it speculative; cf. Austin's musing *ad loc*., "Is the epithet Virgil's own comment on the inscrutability of the will of God?"[14] The close of *Aeneid* IV may be characterized fairly as a quiet diminution of tension after the almost unbearable drama of the preceding scenes of horror, as the maddened queen moved inexorably to her doom.

But in fact, the death of Dido that Juno secures via Iris' agency is more than an act of pity (*miserata*) to secure the *de facto* euthanasia of the fatally wounded regent. The death of Dido is nothing less than the beginning of the curse on Aeneas and his descendants that the queen had invoked at IV, 607ff., the blood price of which was her own life (IV, 621 *haec precor; hanc vocem extremam cum sanguine fundo*). Dido associates her suicide with the fulfillment of the curse: her blood will be offered as the price of its incarnation ("quasi inprecationes ipsas suo consecraret cruore" – Servius *ad loc*.), the ultimate libation to ensure the efficacy of her prayer.[15] Said prayers include such omnibus ill wishes as eternal enmity between Aeneas' descendants and Carthage: ... *nullus amor populis nec foedera sunto* (IV, 624), with the solemn future imperative as if Dido were a veritable Roman legislator.

By securing the demise of Dido, Juno does much more than manifest compassion to a dying royal. She hastens the incarnation of the imprecations that Elissa had uttered against her Trojan *quondam* lover and his children: the snipping of the lock of Dido's hair that devotes her soul to the infernal powers will also secure the efficacy of her curse.[16] Juno is omnipotent here because this is in an important sense her most powerful moment thus far in the epic; in the course of the dozen

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omnipotens. At VIII, 334 it is applied to Fortuna, and metaphorically to the house of the gods at XII, 791.

12 Further, the goddess is *Iuno omnipotens* in Book IV, and *Saturnia omnipotens* in Book VII: "Saturnian" accords better after the highlighting of the significance of Saturn to the history of Italy as delineated at VII, 45bff.

13 Significantly, by IX, 1ff. it will be Iris who rouses Turnus to action in the wake of Aeneas' absence from the Trojan camp on his mission to secure allies in the Latin war.

14 On the goddess in Virgil see Bailey 1935, 129–132, and Farrell 2021.

15 The description of Juno as *miserata* is also effective in that it recalls the same appellation of Dido as Aeneas addressed her at I, 597 *o sola infandos Troiae miserata labores*. Servius is cited from Guillaumin 2019.

16 Cf. here Bednarowski 2015 (with consideration of the agency of Dido and Juno in deception aimed at Aeneas).

lines plus one of the end of this book, she masterfully ensures untold harm for Aeneas and his Roman progeny. The end of the first third of the epic thus comes with a moment of Junonian power and success, just as the last third will reach a divine climax in the goddess' victory via the settlement of the Italian *versus* Trojan cultural identity of the future Rome at her reconciliation to Jupiter (XII, 829ff.).[17] Juno is omnipotent as she guarantees nothing less than the future catastrophe of the Punic Wars; she will be omnipotent too with reference to her commission to Allecto to set into motion the war in Latium, a war that will reach its resolution in Book XII on the divine plane with the reconciliation of Juno and Jupiter, and on the mortal with the slaying of Turnus by the enraged Aeneas (XII, 945ff.). Said resolutions will secure a bright future for Ausonia *versus* Troy in the settlement of Roman cultural identity, and something of a transference of the wrath of Juno (cf. I, 4 ... *saevae memorem Iunonis ob iram*) to the hero Aeneas (XII, 946–947 ... *furiis accensus et ira* / *terribilis* ...).[18] Homer's *Iliad* was the song of Achilles' wrath, which was placated by the quiet close of the epic with the burial of Hector; Virgil's *Aeneid* ends with a reminiscence of Achilles at his most wrathful in the wake of Patroclus' death, with no possibility of reconciliation in the manner of *Iliad* XXIV. Epic history cycles back to the first verse of Homer's epic of rage, with no hope of relief offered by the new poet as he sings of Turnus' indignant shade and its flight to the shadows.

Pease found the epithet *omnipotens* of Juno to be "ironical … when her plans have been completely frustrated"[19] – but this is to miss the poet's point: the goddess has been all too successful, having secured a horrifying future for both Trojans and Romans, as outlined in both the rebirth of the *Iliad* in Italy in Books VII–XII, and in the long course of the three future wars of Rome with Carthage. The death of Dido at the close of the first third of the *Aeneid* starts the clock ticking on the fulfillment of that destiny of horror and struggle, and the quiet end of the queen is the ominous beginning of ill for Aeneas and the Aeneadae. It is true that Juno cannot reverse the course of Carthaginian history; she cannot save even the life of Dido. But Jupiter, too, is limited in what he can do; fate and destiny qualify the omnipotence of all of the Olympians, including Juno's omnipotent husband. What Juno manages to achieve by the end of Book XII is appreciable, indeed more than sufficiently so to justify calling her *omnipotens* at this crucial juncture in the epic, as also at VII, 428.

The climax of the second third of the poem will come on the shield of Aeneas (VIII, 675–713), with its depiction of the naval engagement at Actium that in

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[17] Note especially XII, 835–836 ... *commixti corpore tantum* / *subsident Teucri*, with the notes *ad loc*. of TRAINA 2017, and also TARRANT 2012.

[18] On the transference from wrath to Juno to Aeneas via Dido and Pallas, see further especially NEWMAN – NEWMAN 2005, 129–130, 165.

[19] With reference *inter al*. to the complex machinations of Juno with Venus at IV, 90–128.

some sense combines elements of future strife both domestic and foreign: the victory of Octavian over Mark Antony was the crown of the long years of the civil wars, while Mark Antony's paramour Cleopatra is a comparand of Virgil's Dido, a foreign enemy to be vanquished as a key element of the advent of the Augustan Peace.[20] Augustus will emerge victorious, but only after struggles both internal and external, and wars that will ravage Italy (just as the devastating war in the narrative of the second half of the *Aeneid*), with an angry North African queen all too palpably incarnate in late republican Egypt, just as in mytho-historical nascent Carthage. Mark Antony would bring to terrible reality the hazard envisaged by having Aeneas stay indefinitely with Dido; Virgil's Carthaginian queen is epic prototype for the Cleopatra of contemporary history.[21] The fact that Aeneas is ignorant (for all his wonder and joy) of the significance of the pictures on the shield (VIII, 730 *miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet*) is poignant and telling; in part what he cannot understand of the depiction of the Roman future on Vulcan's handiwork is nothing less than the epiphany of Elissa's dark vision for his children and theirs after them, a dark vision that will be illumined only by the coming of an Augustus who will defeat the neo-Dido and her traitorous paramour.[22]

Dido's curse against the Aeneadae will be grimly efficacious, then, and in the near future there will be a war in Italy. Aeneas will experience this Latin strife; his Roman descendants will suffer the ravages of the Punic Wars and a bloody cycle of recurring civil conflicts. The rage of Juno will be transferred to Aeneas in the closing moments of the poem, in the final, fatal encounter of the Trojan and his Rutulian antagonist Turnus, thereby offering something of an explanation for the plague of internecine strife that will mark so much of Roman history (Aeneas and Turnus represent, after all, the two peoples whose destined union has been the source of such controversy and conflict, and the war in Latium is nothing less than the first of many a civil war in Italy). There is thus a direct line that may be drawn from the end of Book IV to the close of Book XII, with the climax of Book VIII revealing something of a crowning, Augustan close to the horrors of the Trojan/Roman past: the forces of Octavian and Agrippa will defeat Mark Antony and Cleopatra, who in some sense are prefigured by Turnus and Dido: figures and

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[20] Thus the reference to the defeat of Cleopatra toward the end of Book VIII balances the death scene of Dido at the close of IV.

[21] See further here SYED 2005, 177–193.

[22] In this analysis of the closing movements of the respective thirds of the poem, we see a way to balance and to afford nuance to the binary analysis of Virgil's work as being either optimistic or pessimistic about the Augustan program: it is possible to see in Virgil's Augustus the savior who will end the long consequences of Dido's curse, an imprecation for which Aeneas bears no small blame both by virtue of his actions in Carthage, and in light of his decision to slay the defeated Turnus, notwithstanding such admonitions as those of Anchises' shade at VI, 852–854.

images of *de facto* civil war, and of foreign, dangerous queens.[23] Roman history in the future tense, then, is unveiled as attaining its culmination in the Augustan solution to the Junonian furtherance of the curse of Carthage's queen. The peace of the future will be accompanied by the exceptional manifestation of Roman devotion to Juno, just as Jupiter promises to his wife at XII, 838–840 *hinc genus Ausonio mixtum quod sanguine surget, / supra homines, supra ire deos pietate videbis, / nec gens ulla tuos aeque celebrabit honores*.[24] The omnipotent goddess will receive signal honors and the particular religious, liturgical veneration that is her desire and due.

Dido's curse will be manifested in nothing less than such future Roman bogeys as not only Cleopatra but also Hannibal, whose advent is anticipated in her dire imprecation at IV, 625 *exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor*.[25] The future horror of the queen's maledictions is prognosticated already even as Aeneas and his men safely sail away from Carthage and see the flames that rise over the stricken city, a sight that fills them with understandable dread, notwithstanding their ignorance of the cause (V, 1–7). The queen's evil spell, as it were, is to be active in every age (IV, 627 *nunc, olim, quocumque dabunt se tempore vires*), a verse of temporal terror in which the asyndeton serves to underscore the urgency of the maleficent wish.[26] Virgil's vision of violence extends from the mythic past of Aeneas to the historical memory of his own age. It would end only, perhaps, in the waters of Actium, under the auspices of an Augustus.[27]

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[23] Virgil's allegories are not (for the most part) unilateral or univalent. And so Aeneas is sometimes Mark Antony (as during his affair with Dido), and sometimes Augustus; Aeneas and Turnus are now and again respectively reminiscent of Achilles. Dido's evocation of Cleopatra is a more straightforward correspondence, though in the allegorical vision of Virgil Dido is more Cleopatra at Alexandria, and the Volscian Camilla the queen at Actium.

[24] The Jovian assurance constitutes a response to Juno's plaintive concern at I, 48–49 ... *et quisquam numen Iunonis adorat / praeterea, aut supplex aris imponet honorem?* The complaint of the angry goddess from the opening of the epic is thus resolved near its end.

[25] Fratantuono and Smith note *ad loc*.: "This is the verse that Cosimo de Medici's enemy Filippo Strozzi the Younger wrote in his own blood on the wall of his prison cell before his suicide or murder, and that Frederick William, Elector of Brandenburg, uttered after the Peace of Saint-Germain-en Laye in 1679. Since Servius it has been accepted that this line foretells the Second Punic War and the coming of Hannibal Barca."

[26] *Olim* need not refer only to the past; it can refer to the future (*OLD s.v.* 3), as in its very first use in the epic at I, 19–20 *progeniem sed Troiane a sanguine duci / audierat Tyrias olim quae verteret arces*, in the related passage of how Juno had heard that a race from Trojan blood would come for the destruction of Troy at some point in subsequent history. What matters in all uses of *olim* is the notion of distance in time, either in the past (more usually) or, as here, in the future.

[27] And so in the man of the simile at I, 148ff. to whom Neptune is compared as he quells the Junonian storm (= the first simile in the epic), we see an image of Augustus, indeed an image of Augustus in a nautical context, as at Actium (unsurprisingly, Neptune is also depicted at VIII, 699–700 in the picture of Actium on the shield, where he fights among the

Wrathful Juno had conjured a tempest to discomfit the Trojans on their westward journey to Italy (I, 50ff.); that storm had led directly to the unplanned arrival of Aeneas and his men in Africa (I, 157ff.). Much would transpire between that landing in Carthage and the suicide of the lovesick African queen. The attempts of Juno to circumvent destiny and to harass the Trojans would seem to have been countered by the efforts of such deities as Neptune (cf. I, 124–156), Venus and Jupiter. But in her act of pity for the tortured queen, Juno accomplished far more than the simple relief of Dido's death pangs. She ensured unimaginable, ghastly horror for her hated Trojans, via the realization of a curse that would more than justify the omnipotence the poet ascribes to her.

One final observation may be made in light of our consideration of the weighty consequences of Juno's facilitation of the death of Dido. The horrors of the Punic Wars would be visited on Carthage as well as Rome, indeed with the destruction of Elissa's city as the fate for her once proud north African polity. Aeneas' abandonment of Dido occasioned the queen's suicide scheme, an act of auto-destruction that encompassed not only her own death, but also the curse on the Aeneadae that omnipotent Juno's intervention serves to incarnate. Aeneas' Roman descendants would, however, utterly destroy Carthage, an action that the Trojan hero would eerily announce to Dido by means of a haunting acrostic.

The scene is Aeneas in one of his vain attempts to convey to Dido something of the rationale for his decision to leave Carthage and to abandon his quasi-marital union with the queen.[28] He explains that if he were possessed of complete freedom of action and will, he would be tending to his former city of Troy – indeed, he wishes that Troy were still standing:

Me si fata meis paterentur ducere vitam
auspiciis et sponte mea componere curas,
urbem Troianam primum dulcisque meorum
reliquias colerem, Priami tecta alta manerent
et recidiva manu posuissem Pergama victis. (IV, 340–344)

The acrostic *Maure* that may be read longitudinally in these verses has been noted in the scholarly tradition.[29] Pease noted it and considered it to be accidental.[30]

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gods of Rome on behalf of Augustus and Agrippa). See further BECK 2014; cf. also FEENEY 2014.

[28] See further here LOPEZ 2022, with consideration of the complexities of the question of the nuptial or non-nuptial status of the Dido-Aeneas union, and the implications thereof both in light of Roman social mores and of Juno's status as protectress of marriage. More generally here, note also MONTI 1981.

[29] "Reading the edge", in Neil Adkin's clever phrase (vid. ADKIN 2014).

[30] Cf. his note *ad loc*. On Virgilian acrostics by way of introduction see KATZ 2014, and the same author's "The Muse at Play: An Introduction", in KWAPISZ, PETRAIN, and SZYMANSKI

But the vocative *Maure* here is not without meaning.[31] Aeneas' self-contained five-verse expression of his sentiments regarding his life offers a powerful warning to the Carthaginian of the future, in the person of the hero who will be the progenitor of the future Rome. For the acrostic *Maure* may be read backwards too, so that we read *Maure, eruam*: "Moor, I shall destroy" (i.e., your city, with something like *tuam urbem* as the readily supplied object of the verb)[32] – exactly what would come to pass as the culmination of the three Punic Wars, indeed literally in the sense of digging up so as to destroy.[33] Prediction of the future destruction of Carthage comes amid Aeneas' reminiscence of the lost city of Troy, a realm whose ruin was described twice with the verb *eruere*: cf. II, 4–5 *Troianas ut opes et lamentabile regnum* / *eruerint Danai* …, and II, 612–613 … *totamque a sedibus urbem* / *eruit* (of Neptune), of mortal and immortal cooperation, as it were, in the destruction and overthrowing of Priam's city. Aeneas' remembrance of his Trojan past comes just before he makes clear to Dido that he has an Italian destiny (IV, 345ff.), and that she should not begrudge him this Ausonian future, especially given that she has been cherishing sentiments of Phoenician, Tyrian patriotism (IV, 347ff.).[34] The vocative acrostic invites a verb (either an imperative or a declarative), and that is what Virgil provides, compactly and neatly.

The declaration *Maure, eruam* accords perfectly with what would unfold in the history of Rome's interaction with Carthage, and is particularly poignant and

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2013, 1–30. Acrostics must be read with caution and skepticism; Virgil's *E*. IV, 47–52 offers a notorious example of a longitudinal spelling that seems to mitigate against efforts to find such more or less hidden messages in ancient poetry. On the other hand, compare for example CASTELLETTI 2022, 2ff., for a detailed study of the elaborate acrostic that some have identified in Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* II, a good example of acrostic hunting that is far more complex than consideration of the simple *Maure*.

31 It must be acknowledged that *Maurus* does not occur in Virgil (though it does in both Sallust and Livy, and later in Ovid and Lucan); *Maurusius* occurs at IV, 206–208, with reference to Iarbas' people west of Carthage, and not Dido's – though Carthage historically would employ Numidians (who were conflated with Mauri) as mercenary cavalry, and we may note the Massylians at IV, 133 who are put of Dido's hunting retinue, though they are properly inhabitants of a region far to the west of the queen's city, a region not under her direct control either. Virgil does not engage with allusion to any later history concerning the spread of Carthaginian hegemony in the west; while Iarbas and other neighbors pose threats to nascent Carthage, there is also a clear presence of neighbors as allies or at least friends of Dido's Carthaginians. Dido emphasizes the fragility of her settlement as part of her strategy to retain Aeneas (just as Anna had used it to encourage pursuit of the relationship); Virgil is careful too to make Carthage seem formidable and threatening (especially to Aeneas' fledgling exiles), in foreshadowing of later Roman history.

32 *Eruere* in the sense of razing a town or building to the ground (*OLD s.v.* 4) usually takes an accusative object.

33 I.e., one of the primary meanings of *eruere* (vid. Lewis and Short *s.v.* I B). Carthage will be destroyed as thoroughly (root and all, we might say) as Troy.

34 Cf. here SKULSKY 1985.

fitting for Aeneas to utter unknowingly, as it were, as he explains to Carthage's queen why he must pursue his Italian fate. Omnipotent Juno would do her part as Carthaginian patroness to secure the efficacy of Elissa's curse on the sons of Aeneas. But *Maure, eruam* would spell out the ultimate fate of the doomed Carthage, as both allusively and acrostically Virgil brings together Troy, Carthage, and Rome, a triad of cities with two slated for destruction, and one for *imperium sine fine*.

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Abstracts

A Brief Reflection on the Death of Dido, with an Acrostic Coda

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Close study of the end of Virgil's fourth *Aeneid* will demonstrate the appropriateness of the poet's identification of the goddess Juno as "omnipotent," in light of the curse of Dido on the Romans of the future and its manifestation in the history of the Punic Wars. Consideration of the noted acrostic *Maure* from earlier in the book will reveal an inadvertent prediction of Rome's eventual success over the Carthaginian queen's imprecations.

[Krátke zamyslenie sa nad smrťou Dido s akrostichom v kóde]

Analýza záverečnej časti štvrtej knihy Vergiliovej Eneidy ukazuje, ako vhodne pôsobí básnikovo označenie bohyne Juno ako „všemocnej" vo svetle kliatby, ktorú vyslovila Dido o budúcich osudoch Rimanov a ktorá sa zhmotnila v dejinách púnskych vojen. Úvaha o známom akrostichu Maure z predchádzajúcej časti štvrtej knihy odhalí neúmyselnú predpoveď konečného víťazstva Ríma nad kliatbou kartáginskej kráľovnej.