Dido as Paradigm of the Tragic Heroine in the Works of Hélisenne de Crenne

Diane S. Wood

The popularity of the tragic story of Dido during the French Renaissance is reflected not only in many translations and in the theater, but also, in popular fiction by Hélisenne de Crenne who utilizes the figure of Dido as inspiration for her female characters. In her writings Dido symbolizes an example of great feminine virtue as well as a warning of love's potential for destructiveness. Dido, the unfortunate victim of love in the Aeneid, serves De Crenne as a paradigm for the woman who tragically loses herself to amor. Always a didactic author, De Crenne's four prose works offer examples of love's excesses and the perils of sensuality. Regardless of the genre she utilizes—the sentimental novel, the epistolary, the allegorical dream and the epic—she presents facets of the disastrous effects of passion. Writing of love's dangers in an epoch permeated by classical literature, she recreates in her sixteenth-century heroine the emotional turmoil of the Carthaginian Queen and goes beyond her model to find in Christian Neoplatonism a resolution to the difficulties caused by passion.

De Crenne's novel Les Angoisses douloureuses qui procedent d'amours (1538) presents the terrible consequences of love on the lives of her protagonists. Les Epistres familières et inuectiues (1539) complements and retells in letter form the plot of the novel and defends Hélisenne as a woman author. Le Songe (1540) uses the allegorical dream tradition to abstract the conflict between Sensuality and Reason portrayed fictionally
in the first two works. Her *Eneydes* (1541) translates into prose the story of the Carthaginian Queen, making accessible to the non-Latinist Vergil's tale of love and betrayal. Read together, De Crenne's *corpus* offers a unity of vision about love's destructiveness which can be traced by examining her complex presentation of the Dido story.

For De Crenne, Dido personifies an inherent dualism of character demonstrating both heroic virtues in the face of great obstacles and abandonment of these same virtues because of love, the embodiment of the cruel tension between chastity and carnality. De Crenne finds a paradigm of love's negative power in the striking contrast between Dido's courage before the arrival of the Trojan refugees and her subsequent character disintegration. She underscores Dido's dual nature by emphasizing her positive and negative qualities as two distinct exempla for the reader, thereby distinguishing between her virtuous conduct which is to be emulated and her tragic weakness which is to be avoided.

De Crenne catalogues Dido's positive qualities as a model for emulation in her eighth *epistre familiere*. She underscores Dido's constancy in her devotion to her dead husband as a paradigm for a young woman who is resisting parental pressure to marry. This mention of Dido affords the letter writer an opportunity to display her erudition to her correspondent in a sort of compendium of classical literature. She explains the Queen's names at length, including the supposed Phoenician etymology of the appellation "Dido"; [tu] t'effor­ceras d'estre semblable à celle à qui la magnanime constance, fut occasion de changer son nom primitif, qui estoit Helisa: Mais subseque­ment appelé fut Dido, qui en langaige Phenicien est interprété comme Virago, excerceant oeuvres viriles . . ." (D4v-D5v). The author's emphasis on the name Helisa and the manly nature of the Carthaginian Queen casts light on her conception of Dido. In De Crenne's view, Dido accomplishes "oeuvres viriles" by building Carthage. She is a successful monarch, ruling in her own right, and furnishes an example of wise leadership by a woman. Hélisenne intends for her correspondent to emulate the *virago* by being