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Facing the Minotaur: *Inception* (2010) and *Aeneid* 6

JULIA D. HEJDUK

I THOUGHT I was earning some Mommy Points by taking my twelve-year-old son to see a trendy heist movie with a mind-bending premise and cool explosions. The last thing I expected was a film that would stimulate exciting insights into Virgil's *Aeneid*. Yet like the ancient poet, modern filmmaker Christopher Nolan taps into a myth of inexhaustible power, one that expresses some of the deepest and most uncomfortable truths about the human soul. For both artists show their heroes entering an alternate reality that blends the Cretan labyrinth, the underworld, and the subconscious mind, where they must slay or be slain by a Minotaur—that perfect symbol of the guilt, desire, and terror at the innermost region of the psyche.

Freud, of course, thought our unconscious desires were best embodied in the myth of Oedipus. But in many ways, Crete offers a more universal psychic model than Thebes: the Minotaur lurking in the labyrinth touches some of the same springs, but others too, in an even more compelling way.¹ The monster himself is the product of guilt through and through: King Minos' refusal to sacrifice a beautiful white bull to Poseidon, an act of concupiscence with dire religious repercussions, caused the god to instill in Minos' wife Pasiphae a desire for the animal. The man-bull born from their union (made possible by a fake cow contraption created by master-craftsman Daedalus), beloved by its mother, was hidden away in the labyrinth (also designed by Daedalus) where it fed on youths and maidens imported each year from Athens as retribution for the Athenians' killing of Minos' son. With the help of Minos'

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daughter Ariadne, Athenian superhero Theseus slew the beast, followed a thread to find his way out of the labyrinth, and escaped with Ariadne, whom he later abandoned on a desert island—yet more guilt leading to more death. The Cretan legend is among other things a gripping story about the ongoing consequences of disordered desire and repression, about locking away the unspeakable thing whose dark power threatens to devour us if it is not overcome.

Inception (2010), with its brilliant premise of manipulated shared dreaming, provides similarly fertile ground for Freudian exploration of the psyche. The vulnerable youth Fischer, recently become heir to a corporate empire, is haunted by the belief that his emotionally remote father was disappointed in him. Rival company owner Saito hires a group of con-artists to enter a shared dream with him and plant the idea (a process called “inception”) that Fischer’s father loved him and wished for him to establish his own identity by breaking up the corporation. But Cobb, the film’s protagonist, fears to participate because of the disastrous experience that led to the death of his wife, also a master dream-architect: after their decades-long paradisiacal shared dream (which took only a few hours in real time), she was unwilling to return to waking reality. By planting the idea that “your world is not real,” Cobb inadvertently caused her to believe, upon waking, that the real world was not real, and she committed suicide to return to her imagined reality. Charged with her murder and unable to return to his children, Cobb needs to be freed from the crushing burden of guilt over his wife; in the parallel plot, masterfully interwoven, Fischer must overcome the devastating grief and inferiority complex springing from his relationship with his father.

Aeneas must also confront the potentially paralyzing emotions attaching to the ghosts of his past. The underworld Virgil portrays in *Aeneid* 6, while in some sense the univer-

sal resting place populated by all the dead, is in another sense specifically tailored to Aeneas. In meeting the Shades of Palinurus (337–83), Dido (450–76), and Deiphobus (494–547)—the helmsman who represents his wanderings, the lover/wife who represents his chief temptation to abandon his expedition to proto-Rome, and the fellow Trojan who represents the war his people lost—he delves ever deeper into the painful memories of his previous life. Near the book’s end, the Shade of his father reveals the “history in the future tense” that awaits Aeneas and his Roman descendants (679–899). It would be satisfying to conclude, as many readers have, that these encounters have helped him to come to terms with his past and prepared him for the future. But if we examine the encounters themselves more closely—especially the one with Dido—it is far from clear that his catabasis brings such closure.

Allowing *Inception* to function as a commentary on *Aeneid* 6 brings into focus some troubling aspects of Aeneas’ underworld journey. In particular, Nolan’s handling of Cretan myth raises a crucial question for readers of Virgil to consider: If the underworld is figured as a labyrinth, where—or who—is the Minotaur? I shall argue that the poet, like the filmmaker, has placed at the labyrinth’s center the woman whose suicide the hero has caused—but that whereas Cobb is successful in metaphorically slaying that monster, Aeneas is not.

AENEID 6: DIDO AND THE LABYRINTH

ON THE DOORS of the temple that marks the entrance to the underworld at the opening of *Aeneid* 6, Virgil famously depicts the story of the Cretan labyrinth, complete with Pasiphae, the Minotaur, and the Athenian youths chosen by lot to be sacrificed to the monster. The ecphrasis has rightly been seen as having numerous thematic connections to the *Aeneid* as a whole and to the underworld in particular. Many readers have also recognized the importance of Cretan

legend in Dido's story: like Ariadne, she rescues a hero who then abandons her; like Pasiphae, she engages in an impossible love that results in her doom.² Yet no one has quite articulated another possible connection: that Dido herself, who appears at the precise center of *Aeneid* 6, is the Minotaur Aeneas must slay. After following the trail of labyrinthine allusions leading up to Dido's appearance in the dark wood, I shall consider what the implications of this association might be.

One such thread involves a kind of erudite verbal play, beloved by Virgil and other learned poets of his generation, in which a noticeable gesture of meter, grammar, or etymology becomes thematically linked to similar formations, so that a single word or phrase can recall an entire context. The trail begins with Catullus 64, whose central ecphrasis on Ariadne's romance with and abandonment by Theseus finds many resonances in Virgil's tragedy of Dido. Catullus memorably describes the winding paths of the labyrinth as an *inobservabilis error*, an untranslatable phrase in which *error* conveys both "meandering" and "mistake":

Inde pedem sospes multa cum laude reflexit
errabunda *regens* tenui *vestigia filo*,
ne labyrinthis e flexibus egredientem
tecti frustraretur *inobservabilis error*.

(Catullus 64.111-15)

Then, unharmed, he retraced his steps amid great praise,
guiding his wandering *footsteps with a slender thread*,
lest as he made his way out of the labyrinthine curves
he be foiled by the building's *inscrutable wandering*.

Virgil reworks this passage in his own description of the labyrinth at the beginning of *Aeneid* 6:

Minotaurus inest, Veneris monimenta nefandae,
hic labor ille domus et *inextricabilis error*;
magnum reginae sed enim miseratus amorem

Daedalus ipse dolos tecti ambagesque resoluit,
caeca regens filo uestigia.

(Aeneid 6.26–30)

The Minotaur is within, reminder of unspeakable desire,
here is the labor and *inextricable wandering* of the house;
but Daedalus, taking pity on the queen's great love,
himself unraveled the traps and windings of the building,
guiding blind footsteps with a thread.

There can be little doubt that Virgil's *inextricabilis error* is a direct allusion to Catullus' *inobservabilis error*, and the additional echo of *regens vestigia filo*, "guiding his footsteps with a thread," reinforces the point. Virgil uses a similar phrase, *inremeabilis error* ("unretraceable wandering," 5.591), in his simile likening the boys' Troy Game to the Cretan labyrinth. Since both of Virgil's passages, like Catullus', are describing the labyrinth with the striking phrase *in-something-abilis error*, they surely are connected both to each other and to Catullus.

Once the labyrinth has become associated with this construction, a single word can reactivate that resonance—and Virgil does this, I suggest, shortly before the appearance of Dido. When Aeneas has crossed the Styx and is about to step onto the bank of the underworld, the river is called an *inremeabilis unda* (6.425). Ancient marginalia (graduate school, perhaps?) in my Virgil text reflect a naive reader's response to this word *inremeabilis*: "int [short for "interesting"]—used of labyrinth in 5." In fact, though the author of that comment was unaware of this at the time, the word appears nowhere else before Virgil, and he uses it only in these two places. It is likely, then, that Virgil intended to remind his readers here of the labyrinth imagery with which the book opened. Seven lines later (432), another remark appears in my margin: "And here's Minos"—the president of a very Roman-looking criminal court of the dead. Fifteen lines after that (447), among the Fields of Mourning for women who died because of love, we encounter Pasiphae; since

there is no known tradition of her violent death, and her object of passionate love seems to have been a quadruped, her appearance here is especially conspicuous. In the twenty-five lines preceding Dido's appearance at the book's center, then—line 450 of 901—there are at least three references to the labyrinth story.

Is there any justification, however, for regarding Dido herself as a Minotaur figure? Here we must be clear about the nature of Virgilian allusion: for his complex characters, and Dido is one of the most complex in the poem, Virgil never draws upon just one source. One could name dozens of mythological figures, both male and female, who contribute to her portrait: not only the seven heroines in the Fields of Mourning who precede her, but Medea, Nausicaa, Diana, even Ajax and Hercules—the list could go on almost indefinitely.³ This is one of the joys of reading a learned author working within a rich literary and mythological tradition. As Eskimos have fifty words for “snow,” and Texans have fifty words for “ants,” so Virgil has fifty and more than fifty models for abandoned women and tragic heroes. To return to *Inception* for a moment, Cobb expresses this concept of multiple allusion beautifully when he explains how he and Mal lived in a dream-home that was simultaneously a traditional house and an ultra-modern apartment: “In the real world, we'd have to choose, but not here.” In dreams, we can encounter figures who are somehow, impossibly yet possibly, our fifth-grade teacher and our former best friend and Britney Spears; art allows the same stunning combinations. To say that Dido is Aeneas' Minotaur, then, is to say that recognizing this layer of allusion adds another facet to the gem.⁴

Among these many facets, there is at least one that could be described as monstrous. The underworld encounter contains much that is uncannily dreamlike: when Aeneas first sees her she is wandering in a great wood and appears darkly, *obscura*, like the moon just barely glimpsed rising through the trees (452–54)—a simile used in Apollonius' *Argonautica* of Heracles (4.1477–80), emphasizing his dis-

tance from the Argonauts. Yet suddenly Aeneas is standing close enough for her to hear every word. After his speech Virgil gives us a strangely contradictory description of her posture:

talibus Aeneas ardentem et *torua* tuentem
lenibat dictis animum lacrimasque ciebat.
illa solo fixos oculos auersa tenebat . . .
(466–68)

Aeneas, with such words, was trying to soothe the soul
burning and glaring *fiercely*, and was moving tears.
She, turned away, was holding her eyes fixed on the ground . . .

Whether it is his own tears or hers that he moves is, as so often with Virgilian tears, left ambiguous; how a mind or soul, *animus*, can be “glaring fiercely” is another puzzle. Just as Dido’s shade was both distant and immediately present, so, with dreamlike impossible possibility, it is both glaring fiercely—the reader assumes at Aeneas—and turned away with eyes fixed on the ground. The word I would like to focus on here, however, is *torua*, which I translate “fiercely” but which is more literally a substantive adjective, “glaring fierce things” (like our expression “looking daggers”). Nearly every appearance of this word in Virgil designates something bestial or monstrous: in the *Eclogues*, a lioness (2.63); in the *Georgics*, significantly for our purposes, a cow (3.51); in the *Aeneid*, the brow and eyes of a Cyclops (3.636, 3.677), the snakes or face of a Fury (6.571, 7.415), and the bloody glance of Amata when infected by one (7.399). The only sane human described with this adjective is Abas (10.170), and his followers have such an interesting connection to the Cyclopes that Virgil may have used it there for that reason. Certainly, that word alone would not be sufficient to establish Dido as a monster or beast, still less a Minotaur; but given the other contextual clues and the thematic appropriateness of such an allusion, it allows for the possibility.

In any event, the encounter is certainly not, from Aeneas' perspective, a victory. Those fiercely burning eyes, whether piercing her former lover or turned away from him, do not close. She flees into the shadowy wood, his enemy for all eternity: *inimica refugit / in nemus umbriferum* (472–73). If the labyrinth that is Virgil's underworld also represents, at some level, Aeneas' own soul, we could say that the pain and guilt Dido causes him are repressed but not vanquished. Virgil describes the Minotaur as a “reminder of unspeakable desire,” *Veneris monimenta nefandae* (6.26); at the end of the poem, Aeneas, who is beginning to be swayed to show mercy to Turnus, is re-enflamed by the sight of Pallas' swordbelt, “a reminder of savage pain,” *saevi monimenta doloris* (12.945). Aeneas is a champion at pressing pain deep in his heart, *premit altum corde dolorem* (1.209), but it rises up to overwhelm him at last.

INCEPTION: EPIC DREAMS AND A MONSTER SLAIN

AMONG THE MANY thrills of Christopher Nolan's blockbusters—for the classicist, at least—is his absorption and rejuvenation of the ancient epic tradition. (Is not the moral struggle of “Two-Face” Harvey Dent in *The Dark Knight* (2008), driven mad by the murder of his loved one, the very emblem of Aeneas in *Aeneid* 10 and 12? “Madness is like gravity, all it takes is a little push”: Are not the Joker's words a commentary on the *Aeneid*'s entire second half? But I digress.) *Inception* opens with our hero washing up on a shore, a hero who, like Odysseus and Aeneas, is struggling to reach his home. In a perfect illustration of epic “ring composition,” the final scene in the dream world, the encounter with Saito, is the very one with which the film opens. Another epic trademark is expert forger Eames' impersonation of Fischer's mentor, a word that derives from the wise old man impersonated by the goddess Athena to instruct Telemachus in the *Odyssey*. The spinning top, a talisman that mysteriously symbolizes the passage between the wak-

ing and sleeping worlds, resembles another mysterious metal object that affords such passage: when the aged Saito says, “I know what this is. I’ve seen one before, many, many years ago,” he is to my mind the spitting image of the ferryman Charon, marveling at the Golden Bough “seen after a long time,” *longo post tempore uisum* (6.409). Yet Saito also resembles Aeneas’ helmsman Palinurus, the one comrade (almost) sacrificed to the mission, (almost) trapped between the living and the dead.

The list could go on; but most importantly for our purposes, Nolan represents the descent into the world of dreams as a catabasis, a journey to the land of the dead. The name for the terrifying realm of the “undifferentiated unconscious,” where Saito risks being trapped forever until rescued by Cobb, is “Limbo,” the outermost ring of Dante’s Inferno, where Virgil and the virtuous pagans famously reside; and Cobb tells Mal that he must see their children “up above,” not stay with her “down here.” Conversely, the film reminded me that Virgil’s underworld is also the realm of sleep: as Charon tells Aeneas, “this is the place of Shades, of sleep and of soporific night” (*umbrarum hic locus est, somni noctisque soporae*, 6.390). That Aeneas should meet there the particular *umbrae* most likely to haunt his dreams is a beautiful piece of psychological realism. The film constantly teases the viewer with different layers or levels of dreams, so that we are never quite sure whether our hero has made it back to reality; this indeterminacy is symbolized by the spinning top, which is supposed to fall over if and only if the dreamer has in fact awakened. When Cobb sets it twirling at the very end of film, it wobbles—but only a little. Aeneas’ famous exit through the Ivory Gate at the book’s end—the gate that sends forth *falsa insomnia*, false dreams—effects precisely the same sort of exasperation. Is the panorama of Roman history he has just seen a false dream? What is real, after all? Do we wake or sleep?

Nolan’s debt to ancient myth is more obvious still in his use of the labyrinth theme. He signals its centrality even be-

fore the movie begins, reviving the maze on the Legendary Films logo; a labyrinth gleams on the surface of the DVD. And how many modern young women are named “Ariadne”? The film’s heroine, the architect who both constructs the dream world and helps Cobb to escape from it, tells us that she has designed it in the form of a labyrinth, as she holds up a large model of a labyrinth. No need to look for subtle clues here.

A little more subtle, but no less striking, is the similarity between Mal and Virgil’s Dido. Like Cobb, Aeneas has unintentionally caused his beloved—Dido would say, “wife”—to commit suicide. Often throughout the film, I found myself seeing Aeneas and Dido in Cobb and Mal. The dream world they create together, magnificent in its complexity and grandeur, is entirely empty of other people—a perfect emblem of the consuming passion that seeks only its beloved, as Aeneas and Dido (according to Fama) have heated up the winter “between themselves,” *inter se* (4.193), forgetful of those depending on them. The way Mal keeps popping up everywhere, intruding on all Cobb’s plans, is like a personification of Dido’s curse, “as a Shade, I will be in all places,” *omnibus umbra locis adero* (4.386). Her burning eyes when she screams at Cobb for betraying her are a very illustration of Dido in her fury when Aeneas says he is leaving her.

But their final meeting is most conspicuous in its absolute reversal of Aeneas and Dido, and shows just how disturbing the Virgilian meeting actually is. Dido’s response to Aeneas’ anguished plea is the most cutting rejoinder of all: silence. Those fiercely glaring eyes may be turned away and fixed on the ground, but they are never closed. There is no attempt at an embrace. Rather than admitting his feeling of guilt, Aeneas expresses disbelief that his departure could have brought her so much pain. In the film, by contrast, Cobb is able to come to terms with his own pain and say goodbye in a way that enables him to move on. Mal asks him, “What do you feel?,” and he replies, “I feel guilt”; the psychotherapists would tell us that acknowledgment is the first step to recov-

ery. He is able to converse with her, to face squarely the temptation to remain below with her forever. When this Minotaur pulls out a knife and nearly kills him, he is saved by—naturally—Ariadne. Mal's beautiful, fierce, furious eyes are finally closed, and she vanishes from the film. For Cobb has come to a realization that enables him to escape, and his choice of words establishes conclusively the filmmaker's debt to the classical catabasis: "You're just a Shade."

CODA: A SECOND MINOTAUR?

I HAVE ARGUED that both Virgil and Nolan figure their underworld/dream-world as a labyrinth, where the hero must face and overcome the Minotaur that represents the guilt and desire at the center of his own soul. I shall close by looking at another of the film's heroes, the one for whom the dream-labyrinth was actually constructed and whose encounter with his father is the ostensible goal of the whole enterprise. The relationship with one's parents is the first and most primal of all, and it is this relationship that the inception-artists seek to change, so that Fischer will be inspired to break up his father's empire. When Fischer faces his own Minotaur, the father he thought was disappointed in him, he discovers that the old man actually loved him for himself, that the word "disappointed" on his father's dying lips meant "disappointed that you tried to be me." Locked deep in the safe beside his father's deathbed, the child's pinwheel—his Rosebud—represents the ascendancy of personal affection over dynastic aspirations.

This is precisely the opposite emotional trajectory from that of Aeneas' underworld encounter with his father. When Anchises, at the close of his admonitory speech declares, *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento*, "You, Roman, remember to rule the peoples with *imperium*" (851), he completely elides the identity of his own son. Whether he is actually addressing Aeneas as generic "Roman" or looking past him to those who will spring from his line, the message

is clear. Aeneas' value to his father is not as an individual person, still less a beloved son: he is first and foremost the progenitor of an empire. The touching scene between Fischer and his father brought home to me just how dysfunctional, how terrifying, is the *Aeneid's* erasure of the worth and uniqueness of the individual person.

NOTES

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1. See especially R. Padel, "Labyrinth of Desire: Cretan Myth in Us," *Arion* 4 (1996) 76–87. On Freudian psychoanalysis and Roman literature more generally, see E. Oliensis, *Freud's Rome: Psychoanalysis and Latin Poetry* (Cambridge 2009).

2. See W. Fitzgerald, "Aeneas, Daedalus, and the Labyrinth," *Arethusa* 17 (1984) 51–65; P. R. Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca 1990), 227–53; P. A. Miller, "The Minotaur Within: Fire, the Labyrinth, and Strategies of Containment in *Aeneid* 5 and 6," *Classical Philology* 90 (1995) 225–40; and R. Armstrong, "Crete in the *Aeneid*: Recurring Trauma and Alternative Fate," *Classical Quarterly* 53 (2002) 321–40.

3. See J. Tatum, "Allusion and Interpretation in *Aeneid* 6.440–76," *American Journal of Philology* 105 (1984) 434–52.

4. One might also note that in the *Phaedo*, a text on which Virgil draws heavily in *Aeneid* 6 (see C. Weber, "The Allegory of the Golden Bough," *Vergilius* 41 [1995] 3–35), Plato assimilates his hero Socrates to the Minotaur: see R. Burger, *The Phaedo: A Platonic Labyrinth* (New Haven 1984), 213.