

Elissa: Dux Femina Facti

By Emma Vanderpool

Text Summary :

Almost the entirety of the book is narrated by Elissa, Dido, in the first person. She is telling her story the way she experienced it. There was much love all around in her family (father, brother, and her). Her father was the king and both his children wanted to be king / queen respectively. However, Elissa gets married for love and her husband just happens to be rich. Her father dies and her brother, Pygmalion, is titled king; however, he is very jealous of Elissa's husband's wealth. For he is richer than the king! Pygmalion was happy as king as a whole, but very upset at not being the richest. One night, Pygmalion kills Sychaeus (Elissa's husband), and blames an unknown man!

However, his lie is discovered when her dead husband comes back as a ghost and tells her the real story ['Your brother killed me']. He then tells her that he hid the money, and that she also needs to hide it from her brother. So she and her friends flee the king so that she can rule a new town away from there. As she and her friends flee, her brother follows; Elissa being an intelligent woman, placed bags of sand in the sea. Her brother stopped giving chase because he thinks they've put the money in the sea. Her friends made it to Africa where they met the king Iarbas; he then wanted to marry her and for her to rule with him. She did not want that (she loves only one man, her dead husband), made a plan, and was able to get land for her own town. Carthage was on the sea and became very rich, which made Iarbas jealous. He again asked her to marry because of her status and money, not for love of her.

She made another plan, making a sacrifice to her husband. She asked if she could marry again and still be his wife. This led Iarbas to think that he had a shot; however, instead of marrying him she killed herself on a pyre. She did this to save the town of Carthage from a war and to be with Sychaeus. They are both very happy in the underworld together and the Carthaginians love her for saving the town (they recognize her as a goddess and make sacrifices to her).

The last bit of the book outlines the fake story that the Romans tell, involving Aeneas, portraying her as a bad queen and him a good husband. Cupid (Aeneas's brother) went to Elissa, making it so that she loved only Aeneas; who then fled from her and drove her to suicide from heartbreak. The book ends with her [Elissa] summarizing herself in a positive light, being a strong woman queen.

List of Characters and Main Themes :

Characters :

- Elissa (known as Dido)
- Her father : Matan (Belum to the Romans)

- Her brother : Pygmalion
- Her husband : Sychaeus
 - Her husband's ghost
- A king in Africa : Iarbas

Main Themes :

- Female lead and power
 - She was more intelligent and nicer than the male kings
- Discussing how the Roman fable is not the true story of what happened
- Murder (specifically fratricide -> Pygmalion killing Sychaeus)
- Lust for money

Compare and Contrast Ancient and Current Sources :

I believe that Emma Vanderpool chose to rewrite *the Aeneid* in a more female positive light because we have so few primary sources from the time that highlighted female achievement. From the prologue and the final chapter, we can infer that Emma Vanderpool did know the story of the Aeneid / the story of Elissa before writing this modern telling. We can tell this because she summarizes [through Elissa's character] sentences in *the Aeneid* that portray her differently than the modern telling.

Not only did she change small aspects of Virgil's work, she changed almost the entire book fundamentally. Characters that were only briefly mentioned were written in to show us why we should have (and why Elissa had) certain opinions on characters. She also showed Elissa in an empowering light: in the modern telling she was very intelligent, saved her entire town from war, was independent, was able to found a town AND help it prosper, and more.

Honestly, I think it showed me that I should question characters' intentions more often. In *the Aeneid*, we do not have the same backstory to base opinions on characters as we do in the modern telling. In *the Aeneid* we are told that Pygmalion is bad but it never said anything about why or how he killed Sychaeus. We never even heard about Elissa's father, the love in the family, or Iarbas wanting war, and more. Virgil tells us what we need to know of Elissa's story as it pertains to the story of Aeneas. I never considered that someone would want to take that story and completely change it to show an entirely new story, and show us why we have opinions on characters [*the Aeneid* characters].

Character's Plot Lines Compared:

some of the characters have a very short comparative section because they are barely or not at all mentioned in one or the other books [Virgil's Aeneid or the modern telling]

Elissa / Dido:

Similarities ->

- Fled from her brother [Pygmalion] because he murdered her husband [Sychaeus]
- Elissa committing suicide

- Elissa has a hinted upon vow to never leave her husband even though he is dead

Differences ->

- Name: Romans called her Dido, Modern work calls her Elissa
- The reason for Elissa's suicide
 - Lovesick wreck in Virgil's work
 - Saving her town in the modern telling
- Cupid never comes to Elissa to make her love Aeneas in the modern work
 - Aeneas isn't even mentioned in the modern work until the author is summarizing the Aeneid and how the Romans tell the story
- Similarly, everything narrated in the Aeneid is not mentioned in the modern story
 - Fall of Troy, all of the god and goddess interference, the Trojans, etc.

Matan / Belum:

From what I read, he is not mentioned in the Aeneid. So the major difference is that he has a story line in the modern work, but not Virgil's Aeneid.

Pygmalion:

Similarities ->

- Was a king
- He killed Elissa's husband

Differences ->

- He had a bit more of a story line in the modern telling: not much is mentioned in the Aeneid about him except what was a similarity

Sychaeus:

Similarities ->

- He was Elissa's husband
- Was murdered by Pygmalion
- Elissa had a vow to not marry again after his murder
- She really loved him

Differences ->

- He had more of a story line in the modern telling
- He also came back to Elissa as a ghost in the modern telling

Iarbas:

Similarities ->

- He was a king in Africa
- An attempted/possible suitor for Elissa

Differences ->

- In the Aeneid he rages to the god because he heard that Aeneas and Dido slept together

- Which is what sets a chain of events to Aeneas's departure from Carthage

Review on Modern Source :

Emma Vanderpool's *Elissa: Dux Femina Facti* is narrated by Elissa herself and very loosely based on Virgil's *Aeneid*. While she draws upon virtually all the same characters, the entirety of her book is from Elissa's perspective. The one character that doesn't really have a plot line is the main character of the book *Elissa* is based on. The majority is written without any mentions of Aeneas, he is only mentioned when Elissa states (and later on implies) that, "Though the Romans have a story, I want to narrate my story."

Making this book highly relevant to modern readers because it shows a modern perspective to an ancient story. This newer perspective shows a woman in antiquity who is intelligent and in the highest position of power. She outsmarts and evades kings, creates an entirely new town, and ensures her people's safety in order for the town to prosper (monetarily and popularity).

While some may believe that the book is problematic because it goes against / changes *the Aeneid*, they need to remember that it [the *Aeneid*] is a work of fiction. People need to understand that society is constantly changing, adapting, and editing itself. The Classics are still regarded and known as the Classics, but there are also many adaptations of them to portray modern struggles and topics. This is why I do not share that sentiment with people; there are a lot of stories that can be written based off of a character, or even a book. And that is what Emma Vanderpool did, she took an old book and found a way to adapt it to show characters in different lights. That's just what makes living at this time so fun, you can find a book on almost anything you could want. And if you can't find one already written, you can write your own.

There are a couple content warnings throughout the book. In chapter two, Elissa's brother talks about a murder that has occurred. Later on, chapter seven, discusses sacrifice and the characters reasoning for suicide. Personally, I think I would let a fourth grader read this; however, only if they could read it [vocabulary wise] without aid.

If you were interested in reading where the characters from this book came from, read the *Aeneid* by Virgil [specifically books 1-4]. You would learn where the names/characters in Emma's book originated, you would also read about Elissa through a new lens and see her with a completely different disposition.

A book that I highly recommend is *Circe* by Madeline Miller. This is also a modern take on the original story. In the modern version, Circe is a very complicated and independent woman who accidentally attracts the gaze of men and gods through displays of her power. Eventually she is forced to make one of the most difficult decisions, stay immortal in the world she knows or give it all to surround herself with those she truly loves.

Bibliography

1. *Elissa: Dux Femina Facti* (13 October 2021)
2. <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/a/aeneid/summary-and-analysis/book-iv>