

OMNIA TUTA TIMENS (VIRGIL, *AENEID* 4.298): ALLUSION AND AMBIGUITY*

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with a case of Virgilian ambiguity, namely the famous hemistich at Aen. 4.298 omnia tuta timens. By highlighting a plausible reading with a causal force ('fearing everything too calm', 'because of the excessive calmness'), it seeks to demonstrate that this hemistich is an ambiguous passage. This view is confirmed through the imitation by Valerius Flaccus, who, in alluding to the Virgilian passage (Argonautica 8.408–12), highlights its ambiguity by including both of the most plausible readings.

Keywords: Virgil; Valerius Flaccus; ambiguity; polysemy; imitation; intertextuality

'The controversy itself may be regarded as evidence, not of an ambiguity that must be removed, but of an ambiguity that readers have always experienced.' (S.E. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* [Cambridge, 1980], 152.)

'There are moments in the poem when it is well not to be too sure; and there are readers, also, who had better not to be too sure at any time.' (W.F. Jackson Knight, *Roman Vergil* [London, 1966²], 252.)

When it comes to discussing ambiguities in Latin poetry, often what can be considered ambiguous can be simply ascribed to our insufficient knowledge of the poetic language in all its nuances. In a few cases, however, if challenges in the reading of a passage arise not only for us but also for an ancient reader, this confirms that we are facing, if not a poetic ambiguity, at least a problematic and obscure expression worth investigation.¹ This is the case for *Aen.* 4.296–8:

at regina dolos (quis fallere possit amantem?)
praesensit, motusque exceptit prima futuros
omnia tuta timens.

the famous description of Dido's presentiment about Aeneas' imminent departure, where the hemistich *omnia tuta timens* has led to different interpretations.

According to the most common and widespread reading, based upon Servius ('deest etiam; *nedum illa quae timebat. et est exaggeratio*') and Tiberius Claudius Donatus ('amans enim perpetuo ducitur metu, etiam si tuta sint omnia'), the expression is a brachylogy with a concessive force ('fearing everything, even safe things'). These ancient testimonies have considerably influenced later exegesis, as appears clearly from the following short selection of notes on the passage: 'timens etiam quae minime timenda erant' (Wagner);² 'fearing every safety, much more every danger; a natural exaggeration

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¹ For discussion and bibliography on Virgilian ambiguity, see J.J. O'Hara, 'Virgil's style', in F. Mac Góráin and C. Martindale (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge, 2019²), 368–86, at 376–8.

² G.P.E. Wagner and C.G. Heyne, *P. Vergili Maronis opera, varietate lectionis et perpetua annotatione illustrata*, vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1841), ad loc.

of the unquiet suspiciousness of love' (Conington);³ 'to fear where all was safe' (Page);⁴ 'inclined to fear where all was safe' (Austin);⁵ 'fearing everything, even what was safe' (Maclennan).⁶ Pease reinforces this interpretation with Latin parallels,⁷ and is followed by La Penna, who collects Greek passages about the topos of the lover always fearing everything, even when there is no reason to do so.⁸ According to this reading, Dido, like any other lover, cannot be deceived (*quis fallere possit amantem?*), because, fearing everything, even safe things, inevitably leads to the discovery of Aeneas' plan.

This exegesis, supported by Servius' authority, has heavily influenced later imitations of the passage,⁹ but requires a grammatical harshness (the supplying of *etiam*)¹⁰ unparalleled in Virgil (no similar brachylogies have been quoted to underpin the reading), and, what is more, does not shed light on the immediate context (4.288–95), which is worth quoting in full:

Mnesthea Sergestumque uocat fortemque Serestum,
 classem aptent **taciti**, socios ad litora cogant,
 arma parent et, quae rebus sit causa nouandis,
dissimulent; sese interea, quando optima Dido
 nesciat et tantos rumpi non speret amores,
 temptatum aditus et quae mollissima fandi
 tempora, quis rebus dexter modus. ocius omnes
 imperio laeti parent et iussa facessunt.

Finally resolved to leave Carthage, Aeneas orders three of his men to summon the others and prepare to depart in absolute silence, to avoid arousing Dido's suspicions, hoping to find the opportune moment to tell her all, as she remains ignorant of his departure. The idea of silence and dissimulation stressed in the passage (*taciti, dissimulent*) has led to different readings of our hemistich, justified by the polysemy of the adjective *tutus*, which, as noted by Brink, 'oscillates between "safe", "apparently safe" and "on one's guard"'.¹¹ And this is the case for our passage, which is also quoted by Shackleton Bailey when he observes that *tutus* can refer to 'things which look safe but are really unsafe'.¹² Williams also proposes a similar interpretation: 'anxious even when all seemed safe'.¹³ Dido, according to this exegesis, fears everything despite Aeneas and his friends' attempt to maintain an apparent calmness. This reading lays less stress on the topos of the lover's anxiety about everything than on her/his infallible sixth sense.¹⁴

³ J. Conington and H. Nettleship, *The Works of Virgil, with a Commentary*, vol. 2 (London, 1884⁴), ad loc.

⁴ T.E. Page, *The Aeneid of Virgil, Books I–IV* (London, 1894), ad loc.

⁵ R.G. Austin, *Aeneidos liber quartus* (Oxford, 1955), ad loc.

⁶ K. Maclennan, *Virgil Aeneid IV* (London, 2007), ad loc.

⁷ A.S. Pease, *Publi Vergili Maronis Aeneidos liber quartus* (Darmstadt, 1967), ad loc.

⁸ A. La Penna, 'Omnia tuta timens (nota su *Aen.* 4. 298)', *Lexis* 20 (2002), 87–90.

⁹ See, for instance, Jerome's evident quotation in *Ep.* 7.4 *huic ego, ut ait gentilis poeta, omnia etiam tuta timeo*, where the influence of Servius' gloss is clear in the addition of *etiam* to the Virgilian model.

¹⁰ See P.H. Peerlkamp, *P. Virgilio Maronis Aeneidos libri I–VI* (Leiden, 1843), ad loc.: 'dura est ellipsis vocabuli *etiam*, neque castigati scriptores ita loquuntur. *Omnia et tuta non separantur.*'

¹¹ C.O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry, The 'Ars Poetica'* (Cambridge, 1971), 112–13, on Hor. *Ars P.* 28.

¹² D.R. Shackleton Bailey, *Propertiana* (Cambridge, 1956), 86–7.

¹³ R.D. Williams, *Virgil Aeneid I–IV* (London and Basingstoke, 1972), ad loc.

¹⁴ A. Traina, *L'utopia e la storia. Il libro XII dell'Eneide e antologia delle opere* (Turin, 2004²), ad loc. also translates 'per quanto tranquille', but by considering the passage as a parallel of *Ecl.*

Another suggestive interpretation has been proposed by Henry¹⁵ and shared by a few scholars, such as Forbiger¹⁶ or Lejay.¹⁷ The expression *omnia tuta* could have a slightly causal force, meaning ‘fearing everything safe’, ‘because of perfect safety’: perfect safety, a condition one can easily lose, becomes a reason for anxiety for Dido, who fears an unexpected change in her luck. Henry, pointing out that ‘Dido’s only ground of uneasiness is that things are too safe’ and that ‘she fears (*timens*) perfect safety (*omnia tuta*)’, quotes Greek and Latin parallels regarding the gnomic motif of the mutability of luck and the necessity of fearing *res secundae*. According to this interpretation, Dido can be seen as a suffering queen who, after facing adversities and hurdles in her life, has finally found a new land and a new love, and fears to lose what she has painfully achieved.

If we combine the causal view of this last reading with *tuta* as ‘calm’ of the previous one, we have another possible and, in my opinion, plausible interpretation: *omnia tuta timens* would mean ‘fearing all this calmness’. The excessive unnatural calmness of the situation, the effect of Aeneas’ order on his men (289 *classem aptent taciti, socios ad litora cogant*), has aroused the suspicion of the watchful Dido. The adjective *tuta* together with *omnia*, a word that in Virgil often has a pathetic nuance, stressing the idea of a total loss or destruction,¹⁸ has an implicit dative of judgement, applied to Dido: for her, and not for us and the narrator, things—every single thing—appear excessively calm, too calm to be secure. This passage can be considered among the examples of ‘deviant focalization’ in the *Aeneid*.¹⁹

This interpretation, which entails an image psychologically more complex and appropriate to Dido, seen as a perspicacious, sensitive woman and not as a lover simply fearing everything (that would be more suitable for a young, inexperienced girl), has also been suggested, among other possible readings, by Quinn, who considers the passage as an example of Virgilian ambiguity,²⁰ and by Traina, who quotes it in his commentary but dismisses it as ‘sottile, forse troppo sottile, esegesi’ and prefers to follow

3.109–10 (*quisquis amores | aut metuet dulcis aut experietur amarus*) appears to have shared Servius’ interpretation.

¹⁵ J. Henry, *Aeneidea, or Critical, Exegetical, and Aesthetical Remarks on the Aeneis*, vol. 2 (Dublin, 1878), ad loc. He had already published this interpretation in ‘Adversaria Virgiliana’, *Philologus* 12 (1857), 248–70, at 258, and in *Notes of a Twelve Years’ Voyage of Discovery in the First Six Books of the Aeneis* (Dresden, 1853), IV, 46, where he also recalls (at x) to have shared orally some observations on Books 3–6 of the *Aeneid* in 1951, in Leipzig with Forbiger, who included them in his commentary.

¹⁶ A. Forbiger, *P. Virgiliti Maronis opera, pars II, editio tertia correctata et aucta* (Leipzig, 1852), ad loc. admits the difficulty in choosing an interpretation for this evidently ambiguous expression: ‘*omnia tuta* prius mihi videbatur esse i[dem] q[uod] omnia, quamquam tuta, vel: omnia, etiam tuta ... nunc praefero Henrici interpretationem: hoc ipsum, quod omnia tuta sunt, timet; timet, ut haec nimia fortuna stare possit.’ In his fourth edition (1879), Forbiger again changed his mind, preferring his first interpretation.

¹⁷ P. Lejay and F. Plessis, *Œuvres de Virgile* (Paris, 1919), ad loc. (‘elle craint justement parce que tout est ou paraît tranquille’), followed by E. Paratore, *Virgilio Eneide. Volume I (libri I–II)* (Milan, 1978), ad loc. (‘essa che già tutto temeva, appunto perché tutto appariva sicuro’), who rightly observes that this is a ‘frase di ardua interpretazione’. Further interpretations have been proposed, e.g. that by J.W. Mackail, *The Aeneid* (Oxford, 1930), ad loc., who takes *tuta* as a nominative singular referring to Dido (‘although she was safe’).

¹⁸ See N. Horsfall, *Virgil, Aeneid 7. A Commentary* (Leiden / Boston / Cologne, 2000), on 7.635.

¹⁹ I allude to the seminal article by D. Fowler, ‘Deviant focalization in Virgil’s *Aeneid*’, in D. Fowler, *Roman Constructions: Readings in Postmodern Latin* (Oxford, 2000), 40–64 (= *PCPS* 216 [1990], 42–63).

²⁰ K. Quinn, *Virgil’s Aeneid. A Critical Description* (Ann Arbor, 1968), 413.

Servius.²¹ We can agree with Traina about the subtlety (perhaps a Virgilian one?) of this reading, but we may also consider other, post-Virgilian, Latin poets to understand how they interpreted this expression.

An answer to our question is provided by a fine reader of Virgil, Valerius Flaccus, who in the description of his Medea (similarly anxious about betrayal) clearly recalls the Virgilian passage (*Argonautica* 8.408–12):²²

sed miser ut uanos, ueros ita saepe timores
uersat amor fallique sinit nec uirginis annos.
ac prior ipsa dolos et quamlibet intima sensit
non fidi iam signa uiri **nimumque silentes**
una omnes.

Valerius' imitation gives no indication about its model that can help the reader to choose one reading over another, but the poet evidently wishes to comment on the Virgilian ambiguity by exploring various possible readings; in lines 408–10 he imitates the image of the lover who, fearing everything, cannot be deceived. *omnia tuta timens* is 'glossed' by the polar expression *uanos–ueros ... timores*, which recalls, and varies, another Virgilian passage,²³ namely *Ecl.* 3.109–10 *quisquis amores | aut metuet dulcis aut experietur amaros*, usually quoted by modern scholars to support this reading. But from Valerius' imitation, it appears clear that the Flavian poet is aware of the other possible meaning of the Virgilian hemistich: the concessive clause *quamlibet intima ... signa uiri* evidently recalls the reading with concessive force ('even if everything seems calm'), stressing the sixth sense of Medea, who, like Dido, discovers her lover's plan, artfully concealed though it be.

Moreover, the ending *nimumque silentes | una omnes* provides an incontrovertible but hitherto unnoticed allusion to *omnia tuta timens* (just as *prior ... sensit* recalls *praesensit*) in the sense of 'fearing everything too quiet', for various reasons. First, the two expressions are semantically interchangeable: Dido fears the excessive calmness of the situation, Medea the excessive silence of Jason's friends, a forced silence that is typical of the guilty.²⁴ The generic Virgilian expression *omnia tuta* becomes concretized and personalized in *omnes silentes*, where *omnes* translates *omnia*, and *silentes* varies and specifies the adjective *tuta*. Both expressions, finally, provide a closure in enjambement to their whole sentence.

This reading could be supported by some other passages on the deceptiveness of a calm sky or sea, as, for instance, *Aen.* 5.848–51:

'mene salis placidi uultum fluctusque quietos
ignorare iubes? mene huic confidere monstro?
Aenean credam (quid enim?) fallacibus auris,
et caeli totiens deceptus fraude sereni?'

²¹ Traina (n. 14), ad loc.

²² See F. Spaltenstein, *Commentaire des Argonautica de Valérius Flaccus (livres 6, 7 et 8)* (Brussels, 2005), ad loc. For the relationship between Valerius' poetry and Virgil's, see P. Venini, 'Valerio Flacco', in F. Della Corte (ed.), *Enciclopedia Virgiliana* (Rome, 1990), 5.423–4 and W.R. Barnes, 'Virgil, the literary impact', in N. Horsfall (ed.), *A Companion to the Study of Virgil* (Leiden / Boston / Cologne, 1995), 257–92, at 273–8.

²³ The combination of two passages from Virgil is not unusual: Venini (n. 22), 424.

²⁴ See Spaltenstein (n. 22), ad loc.

a motif which recurs again in Palinurus' episode, a few lines afterwards, but in Aeneas' words (*Aen.* 5.870 *o nimium caelo et pelago confise sereno*), and which may also be found in Lucretius, in the image of the deceptive smile of a calm sea (2.559 *subdola cum ridet placidi pellacia ponti*; 5.1004–5 *nec poterat quemquam placidi pellacia ponti | subdola pellicere in fraudem ridentibus undis*).

But the best model for our Virgilian hemistich is in Catull. 30.6–9:

certe tute iubebas animam tradere, inique, me
inducens in amorem, quasi **tuta omnia** mi forent.
idem nunc retrahis te ac tua dicta omnia factaque
uentos irrita ferre ac nebulas aerias sinis.

This is a kind of significant *oppositio in imitando*: the expression *tuta omnia* is similar,²⁵ but the situation has 'evolved', as if Dido—thanks to an 'intertextual knowledge'—is conscious of Catullus' painful experience. The poet has been distressed by his dear friend Alfenus, who convinced him to abandon himself to a dominating friendship—which is so close to love (*amorem*)—as if everything would be safe; but Dido, and the reader with her, is able—thanks to her sixth sense and to the Catullan intertext—to know that lovers, as well as friends, can be deceptive, and that when everything is too calm and perfect things cannot be really safe.

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TRANSPOSITION AT VIRGIL, *AENEID* 8.612–13*

ABSTRACT

This article argues that two words in line 8.612 of the Aeneid, promissa and perfecta, have been transposed since the poem's composition, and that the restoration of their correct order yields a preferable sense. This corruption would have happened at an early stage in the poem's transmission, but there is some reason to believe that Servius' comment on the verse reflects its original state.

Keywords: transposition; transference; Virgil; *Aeneid*; Servius

In the verses before us, Venus presents the armour forged by Vulcan to Aeneas.¹ The manuscripts and Macrobius (*Sat.* 5.8) give the following reading:

en perfecta mei promissa coniugis arte | munera.

²⁵ The passage is quoted by Pease (n. 7), on *Aen.* 4.298, and by La Penna (n. 8), 87.

* I am grateful to Max Hardy for his useful suggestions.

¹ The verses were recognized by Macrobius as a loose imitation of *Il.* 19.10 τὴν δ' Ἡφαιστοιο πάρα κλυτὰ τεύχεα δέξο.