

Art and the Art of Faking: Duplicity and Substitution from Vergil's *Aeneid* (1.643-722) to the Art Market

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RESUMEN

Este ensayo trata de la teoría del arte “falso” y el engaño en un episodio de la *Eneida*. Virgilio narra la historia del engaño de Venus de manera que Dido, la reina de Cartago, sale ciegamente enamorada de Eneas, quien es destinado a fundar el imperio romano, algo que al final perjudica, le hace daño a Dido y a su pueblo. Así, se puede decir que la imitación es una tradición antigua que remonta al mundo greco-latino. Como la substitución por Venus de lo falso por lo real, la práctica del engaño introduce el concepto de la imitación “falsa,” la producción de “lo falso” se ha convertido en un fenómeno tanto en el mercado del arte como el mundo académico.

Palabras clave: arte, arte “falso”, engaño, la *Eneida* de Virgilio, mercado del arte.

ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the complex theory of faking in art and how it is represented in an episode in the *Aeneid*. Vergil narrates the story of Venus' deception to render Dido, queen of Carthage, blindly in love with Aeneas, destined to found the Roman Empire, to her own detriment and that of her people. Imitation was a long-established tradition since the Greco-Roman world. Just like Venus' substitution of the real with the fake, when faking to cheat or to deceive was practiced, then the notion of fraud was introduced. Counterfeiting has become a widespread phenomenon in the art market as well as in the academic world.

Key words: art, art of faking, duplicity, Vergil's *Aeneid*, art market.

The ambition is to uncover the art of faking in its myriad shapes and motives in art. This paper is embedded in a bipartite approach: a discussion on art forgery in relationship to a narrative in Book 1 of Vergil's *Aeneid*, which focuses on identity theft, that is, on substituting the original with a fake, as part and parcel of deception. A further issue worth examining is the similar premise plaguing one aspect of the humanities—plagiarism or copying in art. Faking in the art world is not a recent phenomenon; it was practised since time immemorial. In most classical canons, artists operated on the premises of tradition and imitation. In the modern world, however, protected by copyright law, copying is considered plagiarism and copycats are prosecuted. We are all too familiar with academic plagiarism, which requires that references to other texts be acknowledged and cited. As seen in the fiction of the epic world of the *Aeneid*, the consequences of faking are disastrous. Dido is reduced to a victim of someone else's political agenda.

In the Greco-Roman world, faking was widely practised in the form of imitation (*imitatio*), which in itself constitutes the ultimate flattery. Romans were made to recite passages from Greek epic, lyric poetry, and drama¹. Since education in Rome emphasized memorization and recitation, it created a literate and educated class steeped in the classics—Greek literature. Such facilities with earlier literature enabled the Romans not only to imitate (or repeat) and reuse what they had learnt by rote, but also to rise to the occasion and challenge tradition by adding their own mark—some kind of inventive or original flourishes. Indeed, *imitatio* and *aemulatio* became exercise book activities in unconscious reminiscence as opposed to extreme and deliberate challenge and confrontation².

Although we hardly know anything about education in the pre-classical period in Greece, we are almost certain that teaching involved recitation of stock episodes, verbal formula and catalogue in religious rituals, and geographical and historical facts. The study of poetry (which also include recorded history, myth, and tradition) was also a main educational tool. Transmission through recitation reached its peak in Homer's epics, which in themselves are great fodder for the rhetoricians. By the time of classical Athens, education had developed a curriculum: reading, writing, and arithmetic as well as literature (learning by heart under *grammatistes*); music and lyric poetry (*kitharistes*); and gymnastics, games, and deportment (*paidotribes*). Rhetorical training was another branch of learning. Memorisation of commonplaces, stock situations and phrases, and sample passages formed the basis of pedagogic methods. Learning and testing by recitation became common techniques in teaching. Rome inherited the Greek system, appropriated its culture, and then perfected its pedagogic techniques. As soon as a Latin literature was developed, two parallel systems of education arose, one Greek and the other Latin³.

Consequently, imitation / emulation, thematic repetition, or putting oneself in the tradition (invoking the canon), is all part and parcel of Roman culture, as represented in art, architecture, and literature. Scenes and themes in Homer are re-appro-

¹ Williams 1978: 196: "the element of challenge was what was new in all the close repetition" and the idea "came from the rhetorical schools."

² Williams 1978: 193.

³ Information is taken from "Education", *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

priated and reappear in later Greek and Roman literature; the Roman lyric poets, too, make direct or oblique references to or borrow from their Greek predecessors in the lyric or other genres. The dialogue between Hector and Andromache in the poignant parting scene (before he goes off to be killed by Achilles) is repeated and parodied by Lesbia in Catullus's poems. Plautus and Terence look to Greek New Comedy for inspiration in the stock scenes and stock characters. The *Aeneid*, a Roman epic based on the Homeric epics of battle and journey, begins with "arma virumque cano, [arms and the man I sing]" echoing the first line of the *Iliad*: "Sing now, goddess, the anger of Peleus' scion Achilles, / ruinous wrath which brought the Achaians uncountable sorrows"⁴.

Even within Latin literature, younger poets make references to earlier poets: Horace aligns himself with Lucilius in the satiric tradition, with Juvenal following in their footsteps; and Ovid's *Heroides* find their epistolary origins in Propertius's and Ovid's letters to their mistress. The list goes on.

Augustan poetry flourished under the Roman Empire. Poets such as Vergil, Horace, Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid reached literary maturity under the auspices of Augustus Caesar and such patrons as Maecenas. They were trained to strive for the Greek perfection that had already been attained in the far past. Roman oratory, overshadowed by Demosthenes, Isocrates, and Gorgias, and even the philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, was only being fine tuned in the Republic with Cicero, the great Latin *rhetor*. Vergil monopolised the Roman epic with his twelve books of the *Aeneid*. Lyric poetry flourished under Catullus, Horace, Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid. There existed a wealth of texts for the Roman authors to utilize and an established Greek tradition under which they composed.

Imitation ran its course into later modern literature. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, an epic genre adopted by Vergil in the *Aeneid*, are appropriated in Dante's *La commedia divina* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Poets after Homer echo and repeat one or more of their literary predecessors yet also challenge precedents by stamping their own mark on tradition. The genre of pagan epic became a Christian journey in Dante. While gods and mortal heroes are intertwined in Homer and Vergil, Joyce renders his "hero," Leopold Bloom all the more poignant by making him an everyman, an Hungarian Jew living and marginalized in Catholic Dublin. Even Greek and Roman temples find their counterparts (and equivalents) in Christian churches: columns to achieve overwhelming and fear-inspiring height; the notion of naos, adyton, and temenos (as marking sacred spaces) are seen in churches as naves, apses, transepts, altars, shrines, chapels, and quires.

What happened to the ideal of tradition and originality? When did it all change? Before attempting an answer, I will insert a discussion of an episode in Vergil's *Aeneid* (1.643-722) in which the art of faking goes hand-in-glove with deception. Venus deliberately substitutes Ascanius with Cupid before dispatching the "child" to meet Dido. Ascanius being the son of her mortal son Aeneas (by Anchises), hence her grandson, and of Creusa; the latter also her son, a god of his own right, and

⁴ Translation of the *Iliad* by Rodney Merrill (unpublished). The *Aeneid* also echoes the beginning of the *Odyssey*: "Tell me, Muse, of the man versatile and resourceful, who wandered / many a sea-mile after he ransacked Troy's holy city" (translation taken from Merrill 2002).

half-brother of Aeneas. The goddess adopts this stratagem in order to have the child / god inflame Dido's passion for Aeneas because she is suspicious of the Carthagians and of Juno, the patron goddess of Carthage. The deliberate substitution of Ascanius with Cupid aims to make Dido fall blindly in love with Aeneas. Since the theme of empire building underwrites this founding myth of Rome, Venus' subterfuge claims a disastrous success. Dido in love hastens the eventual and inevitable result: *Carthago delenda est*. The plot leads to the downfall of the queen and of Carthage.

In the *Aeneid*, the scenario of duplicity is simple. The narrative begins with Aeneas' innocent attempt to court the queen of Carthage by having his son, Ascanius, bring gifts to the palace. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Aeneas, his mother has formulated a stratagem to bind Dido to Aeneas in a passion so deep that no god or goddess can undo it. Cupid is called in to help. Venus will "kidnap" Ascanius, her grandson, to her haunt in Mount Ida, while Cupid impersonates the boy Ascanius. In the text, the theme of love undergoes four stages of metamorphosis. The first manifestation is in Aeneas's fatherly love for Ascanius when he has the latter summoned to the palace bearing gifts to Dido. In the next phase love becomes brotherly between Aeneas and Cupid when Venus appeals to the latter to help his half-brother. After that comes maternal love between Aeneas and Venus whose stratagem is motivated by her love for her son. Finally, love becomes all consuming between Aeneas and Dido when the queen of Carthage is alight with passion for the Trojan, the first sign of success in Venus's plan. None of these characters seems to be sensitive to the queen's finer feelings!

There are several operative words in this narrative. The first one is "amor," which changes its function four times: from fatherly love ("patrius amor", 643-644), to Cupid, the god of Love himself ("Amorem", 663, and again "Amor", 689), and back to fatherly love when Ascanius / Cupid is seen embracing Aeneas and the scene is filled with love, but a false kind ("magnum falsi genitoris amorem", 716), and finally to the passion that Cupid inflames Dido with to make her forget her dead husband ("uiuio amore", 721); and this is a living and tempting love because the image of her love is in front of her. While all this is happening, the dichotomy between "dolus" (deceit) and "flammae" (the flame of passion) pursues its own trajectory until it explodes in our face: "capere ante dolis et cingere flamma / reginam meditor" (673-674). Notice should also be taken of the proximity in idea and typology between "dolus" and "donum" (gift or present) and their interplay in the narrative. One makes possible the other and vice versa. The presents act as paraphernalia in the temptation scene; they help to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas. Even the sincerity of the gift giving has been abused and perverted.

What strikes the reader in this narrative is the sinister aspect of love. The mortals are innocent actors and the gods are the schemers. What we are witnessing is a boy seducing a woman. The narrative verges on pornography. Dido is admiring the looks and words of Ascanius as well as the gifts he has brought. The more she looks, the more inflamed she becomes so much so that she takes him for his father and falls ever more in love with Aeneas, and in fondling, caressing, and kissing the boy, can pretend to be doing the same to the father: "haec oculis, haec pectore toto / haeret et interdum gremio fouet inscia Dido insidat quantus miserae deus" (l. 717-719). The gifts Ascanius (Cupid in reality) bears to Dido turns out to be "dolus" in that the

gift bearer has a different agenda. The god of Love is the seducer. In the meantime, we can hardly forget that Ascanius is sleeping unawares far away from the action. A combination of identity theft and forgery has been committed.

There are in addition some other curious features in the narrative. This is, as far as I can determine, the only passage in both Greek and Roman classical literature where a political and personal agenda informs forgery – substitution (of a character by another / a god) – and blatant deceit is practiced to achieve a political aim. Not only Dido, but also Aeneas and Ascanius are tricked (“ne qua scire dolos mediused occurrere possit [Ascanius]”, 682). Not that there are no episodes of substitution or deceit in classical literature. But the significance here is the deliberate faking, substitution, of a character by another in a full programme of deceit. In the epic tradition, gods and goddesses can disguise themselves as mortals and appear before human characters to guide, advise, or delude them, and they never hesitate to resort to deceit. The closest to “substitution” in tragedy is in Euripides’s *Helen* where she is living in Egypt during the entire course of the Trojan War. Another episode of deceit in the form of “hiding” is the Polyphemous episode in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus and his men render him drunk, then blind him, and hide under the belly of his sheep to escape from the cave and captivity. And Catullus fantasises being Lesbia’s *passer* (pet sparrow) so that he would be handled and fondled by his mistress. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, of course, transformations abound and the ultimate state is the result of either punishment or reward. But Venus’ trap is sinister.

The motive behind Venus’ action is deception. The victim does not see the deceit; Dido is complacent in her experience. Venus has made the reader an accessory – an abettor in her crime of deception. Deception is a common topos in ancient literature. Gods and goddesses resort to deception, cheating, and subterfuge frequently to achieve results. What sets apart this narrative in the *Aeneid*, curiously enough, is the fact that it does not find its precedent in the ancient canon. Vergil imitates the theme of deception but creates his own “plot”. I cannot think of another ancient literary example of such identity theft. A boy is not himself and his identity temporarily stolen by the god of Love so as to further the plan of another goddess. This is not a case of mistaken identity: that Cupid deliberately assumes the shape and face of Ascanius (his nephew). Sweet resemblance and dissembled face, the god’s disguise, and false embraces all rolled into Cupid whom Dido is holding in her bosoms. There is no reconciliation scene. Not even is the father aware that the boy is not his son but Cupid, the fake. Bittersweet narrative steeped in guile and ends in the seduction of the queen: child Cupid seducing a grown woman / queen of Carthage. Laden with presents, Ascanius is to court Dido on his father’s behalf to convince her that Tyre and Troy should join force in a marriage between herself and Aeneas: “quocirca capere ante dolis et cingere flamma / reginam meditor, ne quo se numine mutet. / sed magno Aeneae mecum teneatur amore” (673-674)⁵. Dido is a pawn in the game of empire-building.

In the modern art world, fakes have been created for the market and consequently compromise authenticity and valuation. Fakers are in and of themselves

⁵ “Fire with love the proud Phoenician’s heart: A love so violent, so strong, so sure, / As neither age can change, nor art can cure” (translation taken from John Dryden).

artists, as much as Venus plays the role of a consummate artist in subterfuge as well as the mastermind behind the founding of Rome at all costs. This paper does not endorse, condone, or defend fakes and fakers. The interest remains in the art of faking and its evolution during which time it has become the bane of the art market because it not only involves copying (as opposed to original works of art) but also affects valuation.

When did imitation stop and plagiarism begin? When copyright law was written, which itself was prompted by prices (money). But art forgery has accelerated its production when art of all media began to command a high price and even higher re-sale value and be traded as assets or investment. Money is a prime mover. Fakers oftentimes take great pride in their work and may not have been prompted by money. Since fakes and their creators have to remain anonymous to avoid exposure and prosecution, the argument of fame does not apply. The challenge of being as good as (if not better than) the artist motivates faking. In the current art market, Chinese paintings, bronzes, and ceramics are rife with fakers and their art. Likewise, in ancient art, for example, Greek vases, terracotta figurines (from South Italian), and Egyptian art objects are vulnerable to forgery⁶.

Regardless of the motivations, the forger's art, as long as it remains private, can be regarded as a hobby. But the deliberate misrepresentation of fakes as original constitutes fraud. In the *Aeneid*, Venus and Cupid would not have been culpable if their scheming had been a private joke. But their deceit is governed by a cause. By the same token, whenever a genuine work of art is forged and deliberately sold on the art market as original, then the artist's identity has been stolen. An example of such deliberate act of faking is recorded in an investigation into the authenticity of the Minoan snake goddess figurines from Crete, which uncovers the "modernism" of some of them⁷. Skilled Cretan craftsmen fashioned some of these statuettes after the imaginative reconstruction of the palace in Knossos by its excavator, Sir Arthur Evans, in the turn of the twentieth century. These figurines even appeared on the art market as authentic.

The current crisis in the humanities is troubled by plagiarism (copying). Imitation became a problem in the modern world when education declined. Once references to a previous artwork or text were easily recognizable by the educated class (albeit a smaller segment of the population). With the vulgarization of education (meaning more accessible to more people), its level had lowered and fewer people are well versed in the tradition either to make references to existing material or to recognize references made. Consequently, an absence of immediate familiarity in texts or the arts leaves the reader / viewer in a vacuum of ignorance. Memorisation or recitation is no longer part of a school curriculum, and students are not trained in the tradition of the classics, to recognise references made within the corpus or to learn to spot deliberate plagiarism. I do not pretend to exhaust the topic or to have

⁶ Esterow 2005 probes into the nature and current situation of fakes and frauds. Indeed, there is a possibility that good counterfeiters may be recognized as talented artists and their art celebrated by exhibitions of their own right. The mentality driving fakers can be fascinating.

⁷ For details of the Minoan snake goddesses, see Lapatin 2003. The book is part detective story part art history.

fully explored the delicate balance between faking and the desire to deceive. What remains curious is of course the natural instinct to imitate and copy, and the urge to forge.

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