

# Two treatments of a woman scorned



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Mythological accounts constantly transform themselves in crossing cultures and enduring time, but two versions of the story of Dido and Aeneas, one by a shy, serious, government-sponsored poet; the other by an often lighthearted author, a future exile, show that even among contemporaries living in the same city, an author's sensibilities can shape an ancient story. Vergil's tale of Dido and Aeneas, forming the most memorable portion of the Aeneid, is sympathetic to both players while ultimately serving the poem's goal of revealing the toil and tears that went into Aeneas' founding of an empire. Ovid's letter from Dido to Aeneas, on the other hand, forms a part of the Heroides, a work sympathetic to the women whose fictional letters it contains, and subverts the themes of the epic upon which it is based. Vergil's Dido calls on Aeneas' promises to hold him back. Whether these promises ever existed is unclear, but in Dido's mind "[her] plighted right hand" (IV. 307), "[their] marriage" (IV. 316), and "undertaken marriage songs" (IV. 316) should suffice to bind Aeneas to her. Aeneas swears that "[He] never came into a [marriage] pact with [Dido]" (IV. 338-9); from their own points of view both characters are right. To Vergil, this domestic scene has universal implications; whether Aeneas stays or goes will decide the fate of an empire, and the gods themselves are involved in the struggle. Juno, patron of Carthage and Venus, mother of Aeneas, arranged the marriage of Dido and Venus, but neither did so in good faith. Venus "felt that Juno had spoken [of the marriage] with feigned purpose in order to turn aside the Italian kingdom to Libyan shores" (IV. 105-6), and indeed Juno suggests, "'let it be permitted for [Dido] to serve a Phrygian husband and for you [Venus] to entrust the Tyrians as a dowry'" (IV. 103-4). Aeneas and the Carthaginian Queen are exalted pawns in the divine plan. Dido and Creusa, Aeneas' former wife, both

<https://assignbuster.com/two-treatments-of-a-woman-scorned/>

had to die for dramatic expedient so that Aeneas can marry Lavinia and effect peace between the Teucreans and Latins. Though Aeneas' departure is his destiny, Dido takes the fact with less grace than he. In the Aeneid, we see Dido's entire buildup of passion: her initial love, her fears of unfaithfulness to Sychaeus, her acceptance of Aeneas, and here, her rejection of him. We see that she has considerable right to be angry, and angry she is; she treats his task with sarcasm even while realizing the cruelty of the gods, saying, "'doubtless this work is from the gods; this concern disturbs the quiet ones'" (IV. 378). She wishes for Aeneas to "drink in punishments in the middle of the rocks" (IV. 383) and looks forward to his death. We get little of Aeneas' own emotions, as he is trying to be a good stoic, but Vergil does tell us of the hero's regret, that "he desires to calm the sorrowing woman by consoling her and to put away her cares with words, he much lamenting and shaken in his soul by her love" (IV. 393-5). We even are allowed glimpses of secondary characters' emotions, such as the jealousy of Iarbas and the loyal sorrow of Anna. Ovid, on the other hand, has Dido write in the first person and he focuses entirely on her emotions. Where Vergil provides a section of epic that reaches from Aeneas' shipwreck on the shores of Libya to Dido's rejection of her former love in the underworld, Ovid's tale focuses on Dido's feelings just after Aeneas has left. Since Ovid based his account on Vergil's, he must have felt there was something to be gained by narrowing and concentrating his range, making his own version not a thematically broad and sweeping epic but a concentrated torrent of emotion that nevertheless touches upon many of Vergil's themes. In fact, Dido's letter implicitly reverses the fate found so often in the Aeneid; she sees herself as the main character and, while not

<https://assignbuster.com/two-treatments-of-a-woman-scorned/>

outright denying Aeneas' fate, views him as though he never had one. Dido's first argument is sound sense and something that never occurred to her in the Aeneid: that "[Aeneas] flees the achieved and seeks that which must be achieved" (VII. 13), that he has a cozy job as King of Carthage and would be foolish to leave. She worries earnestly about his fate, even more than her own, complaining that "I am not of such worth[...]that you should perish as you flee me" (VII. 45-6), a position it took Vergil's Dido a great deal of time to reach. But Dido here takes the theme much further than her counterpart did. "What did the boy Ascanius, what did the Penates do to deserve this?" (VII. 77) she asks, subverting the Aeneid's theme of sacrifice; Aeneas is not sacrificing his own happiness for the good of his people if "whatever lightning bolts fall [on his ship] are sent for [him]" (VII. 72). Dido even attacks that most sacred of epic character marks, the epithet; Aeneas is not "pius" (his epithet in the Aeneid, meaning "faithful") if he worships with a hand that is "impia" (VII. 130) the Penates he brought from Troy. Dido, having destroyed the rest of Aeneas' credibility, goes on to attack his fate. "Where is the mother of beautiful Iulus? She died, left behind all alone by her flinty husband!" (VII. 83-4) exclaims Dido, putting aside the fact that Aeneas went back to flaming Troy to look for Creusa and saw her ghost telling him to go on. Dido's point is that Aeneas has a fairly suspicious and self-serving "fate". It is a destiny that will lead him to abandon the race it is his duty to save; where in the Aeneid Dido explicitly wishes she had had a child by Aeneas, Dido here is pregnant, and "[Aeneas] will be the cause of his unborn son's death" (VII. 136) when Dido commits suicide. Dido hammers home the uselessness of Aeneas' fate by showing its cruelty and arbitrariness. Tyre would be as just as good a spot as Latium to build a city; "there is place

<https://assignbuster.com/two-treatments-of-a-woman-scorned/>

[there] for the laws of peace, place for arms" (VII. 156). It seems to Dido in Ovid's tale that Aeneas must leave because it is her own fate to be miserable; " fate pursues [her]" (VII. 112). Destiny is by no means benevolent to her; it is not even the mixed draught that Aeneas must drink, of punishments and rewards, lost love and gained empire. Aeneas never curses the relentless lot that drives him all over the seas, but not everyone has such great forbearance, or such opportunity for gain from the endeavor. The fate that in the Aeneid occasionally seems excessive and cruel is nonetheless good; Aeneas is often tested, but never for a pointless cause. Ovid, however, by focusing on Dido's pain and making it seem much more reasonable than it did in the Aeneid, shows that while Aeneas suffered much to build Rome, those whom fate brought low suffered much more.