

A survey of moral sentiments in virgil's aeneid

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Sympathy arises from an instinctive desire to identify with the emotions of others. It can lead people to strive to maintain good relations with their fellow human beings and provide the basis both for specific benevolent acts and for the general social order. In dramatic and narrative power, Virgil's *Aeneid* is the equal of its great Homeric predecessors, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. At the same time, it surpasses them in the intense sympathy it displays for its human actors — a sympathy that makes events such as Aeneas's escape from Troy and his search for a new homeland, the passion and the death of Dido, the relationship between Nisus and Euryalus, and the defeat of Turnus among the most memorable and civically valuable in literature. This notion of sympathy, or “representative thought,” can be explored and is summoned in these episodes in the *Aeneid* through vivid imagery, rhetorical figures, the inherent nature of the characters, and the invocation of memory throughout the epic. Ultimately, the sympathetic relation that Virgil constructs between the text and the reader affects the way in which we communicate complex ideas and emotions, changes the way we view the world, and sharpens our moral judgments. However, in order to fully comprehend the epic's capacity to summon sympathy, first we must define sympathy. According to Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, men are driven by sympathy: we imagine ourselves in the shoes of another and, through that act of imagination, feel a part of what they feel. He also explores the role of the “impartial spectator,” the view we attempt to acquire when we wish to judge the morality of our own actions or someone else's. Smith argues that people feel pleasure from the presence of others with the same emotions as one's self, and displeasure in the presence

of those with “contrary” emotions. Thus, this pleasure is not the result of self-interest: others are more likely to assist oneself if they are in a similar emotional state. Smith also makes the case that pleasure from mutual sympathy is not derived merely from a heightening of the original felt emotion amplified by the other person. Smith further notes that people get more pleasure from the mutual sympathy of negative emotions than positive emotions, but we feel “more anxious to communicate to our friends” (Smith 13) our negative emotions. This idea of sympathy, as Smith defines it, can be seen throughout the compelling imagery and emotional appeal in the *Aeneid*. The story of Dido, the tragic queen, conjures up an overwhelming sense of sympathy and pity in the reader. Although Dido had pledged not to marry after the death of her first husband, she finds herself irresistibly attracted to Aeneas. Virgil’s description of the overwhelming feelings of Dido for Aeneas liken love (especially the love of a woman) to an all-consuming fire: “But the queen — too long she has suffered the pain of love, hour by hour nursing the wound with her lifeblood, consumed by the fire buried in her heart” (Book IV, 1-3). The love of Dido is no fleeting feeling; Virgil emphasizes the long-lasting effects of the love spell of Cupid in his diction: “The man’s courage, the sheer pride of his line, they all come pressing home to her, over and over. His looks, his words, they pierce her heart and cling — no peace, no rest for her body, love will give her none” (IV, 4-7). Virgil draws out her pain in the phrases “too long,” “hour by hour,” and “over and over.” The harsh sounds in words such as “pressing” and “pierce” emphasize the pain Dido feels. The repetition of the word “no” and the use of “none” in the seventh line amplifies the absolute, intense ache Dido feels,

allowing the reader to realize the extent of her pain. Dido has “ no peace, no rest” because “ love will give her none.” The use of the hyphen accentuates the word “ cling” in line 7, since the reader must continue reading to the next line, clinging to each word. The passage builds upon itself from the beginning, creating a crescendo that climaxes in the last line, which demonstrates the building of passion inside Dido. In an attempt to seek the approval of the gods in winning Aeneas as her husband, Dido prays at the shrines of the gods, making sacrifices, further appealing to the audience’s emotions. She looks for signs from the gods in the entrails of the sacrificed animals. This, however, is useless to someone so caught up in the insanity of love: “ But, oh, how little they know, the omniscient seers. What good are prayers and shrines to a person mad with love? The flame keeps gnawing into her tender marrow hour by hour and deep in her heart the silent wound lives on. Dido burns with love — the tragic queen” (IV, 82-86). Virgil reinforces the uncontrollable passion of love by utilizing irony in line 82, stating that the “ omniscient seers” actually know very little when love is involved. The fire allusion reappears in line 84 and again in line 86. The fire of love devours the queen from the inside out. Virgil names Dido “ the tragic queen,” separating the Homeric epithet from the rest of the passage with both a hyphen and a period to accentuate the finality of her fate. The use of the verb “ gnawing” likens love to a carnivorous animal, eating at the “ tender marrow” of Dido. This predator-prey relationship continues: “ She wanders in frenzy through her city streets like a wounded doe caught all off guard by a hunter stalking the woods of Crete, who strikes her from afar and leaves his winging steel in her flesh, and he’s unaware but she veers in flight

through Dicte's woody glades, fixed in her side the shaft that takes her life" (IV, 87-92). Dido has been driven insane by her love. The word "frenzy" depicts the queen's whirlwind state of mind. She "wanders," lost because of her love, yet also lost because of her impending doom. Her love will end in her death; her love is "the shaft that takes her life." The pacing of the passage enhances the reader's sense that Dido is a lost cause, caught up in love. The passage wanders from line to line, taking the reader along winding paths of thought all within the same sentence. Dido has no control; she is merely a "wounded doe." Although Virgil expresses love as a "hunter," this hunter is "unaware" of the damage it wreaks. This imagery personifies an emotion as a tangible entity. The internal turmoil created by uncontrollable love forces Dido to cling to any part of Aeneas she can obtain: "She'd speak her heart but her voice chokes, mid-word. Now at dusk she calls for the feast to start again, madly begging to hear again the agony of Troy, to hang on his lips again, savoring his story" (IV, 95-98). The word "chokes" abruptly ends the clause, demonstrating the inability to speak. The hyphen in "mid-word" further illustrates this point by creating a physical break in the sentence and in the word itself. Dido has lost all propriety as she "madly beg[s]" Aeneas to tell his story just to hear his voice. And once again, love is depicted as insane and uncontrollable. The metaphor "to hang on his lips" and the subsequent use of "savoring" illustrate the hunger that love has instilled in Dido for Aeneas. The addition of the final clause "savoring his story," reiterates the reluctance of Dido to let go of the words of Aeneas. Dido "flings herself on the couch that he left empty" (IV, 102). His choice of the verb "flings" shows the desperation of the queen. Line 102 exemplifies the

need of Dido to be with Aeneas. The couch becomes empty when he leaves, but the heart of Dido also feels empty in his absence. Virgil juxtaposes the wanderings of Aeneas with the path the heart of Dido by writing, “Lost as he is, she’s lost as well, she hears him, sees him” (IV, 103). While Aeneas is considered lost on his journey to fulfill his destiny, Dido is lost in her love for Aeneas, driven mad by her feelings. During the fateful storm that forces Aeneas and Dido to seek shelter in a cave, the tragic fate of the queen is sealed. Virgil begins his description of the event with the two-word phrase “Too late” (IV, 202). The finality of the phrase shows that fate is already decided: Dido is doomed. According to Virgil, the wedding day is more like a funeral: “Primordial Earth and Juno, Queen of Marriage, give the signal and lightning torches flare and the high sky bears witness to the wedding, nymphs on the mountaintops wail out the wedding hymn. This was the first day of her death, the first of grief, the cause of it all” (IV, 209-214). This wedding lacks the typical torches; instead, lightning flashes in the sky. Virgil uses the verb “wail” to describe the nymphs singing the wedding hymn. As “wailing” is usually associated with a sad event, the word is unfit to describe a joyful wedding. Virgil writes out the fate of Dido, stating the inevitable. Once the wedding occurs, it is only a matter of time before Dido dies. The coordination of the nouns “death” and “grief” just after the mention of a “wedding hymn” sharply contrasts the joy of a wedding with the sadness of a funeral, which further summons sympathy in the audience. Once Aeneas heeds the message of Mercury and the will of Jove, the love of Dido comes out in full force. She stoops to both taunting and tears to keep Aeneas with her, but her attempts amount to nothing. Virgil once again compares Dido to

prey, running from “ Aeneas the hunter, savage in all her nightmares” (IV, 584). The tragic queen “ always feels alone, abandoned, always wandering down some endless road, not a friend in sight” (IV, 585-587). Dido loses herself when Aeneas leaves. The wandering direction of the passage reiterates the wandering of Dido down an “ endless road.” Her despair leads her to contemplate suicide; Dido cannot live without Aeneas. As at the start of her infatuation, Dido is given no rest, even at night when all others sleep: But not the tragic queen [...] torn in spirit, Dido will not dissolve into sleep — her eyes, her mind won't yield tonight. Her torments multiply, over and over her passion surges back into heaving waves of rage — she keeps on brooding, obsessions roil her heart. (661-666) Once again, Virgil refers to Dido as the tragic queen. He emphasizes the role of fate in her life and in her death. Instead of “ dissolving into sleep” and lessening her pain, her passion “ multiplies” and “ surges.” The word “ multiply,” coordinated with “ over and over,” demonstrates the building passion inside of Dido. The verbs “ surges,” “ brooding,” and “ roil” give the reader a sense of foreboding, and the “ heaving waves of rage” express the emotional turmoil of Dido. Mercury spurs Aeneas on his journey, appearing to him in a dream while the warrior slept peacefully on his ship. The god insists Aeneas leave at once, claiming “ woman's a thing that's always changing, shifting like the wind” (IV, 710-711). Mercury acts as the voice of Virgil, depicting women as fickle in their love. The punctuation and arrangement of lines further emphasize the idea of change. Dido climbs up on the pyre created from the belongings of Aeneas and proceeds to stab herself. Rumor carries the news, and the city reacts through “ sobs, and grief, and the wails of women ringing out through

homes, and the heavens echo back the keening din." The "wails" of the women are similar to the "wails" of the nymphs during the fateful wedding of Dido and Aeneas, once again demonstrating how the wedding was more like a funeral. Virgil only mentions the women mourning, not the men. This implies the emotional instability of women in general, an appeal to emotion and sympathy toward women. Fated from her encounter with the love spell of Cupid, Dido is doomed to die from the day of her wedding. The Trojan sword Dido uses to commit her deed seems fitting; Dido uses the sword, a gift from her lover, to end the pain he caused her. Although she stabs herself, Dido is not set free from her pain until the last line of Book IV, as though to highlight the length and intensity of her pain. In the final two lines, Iris releases Dido from her body and, consequently, from her pain. She can find solace only in death as "the warmth slipped away, the life dissolved in the winds" (IV, 876). Dido does not "dissolve into sleep" (IV, 662), but death eventually becomes her sleep. Intense, powerful love controls Dido and ultimately leads to her death. Indeed, her love grows into an uncontrollable obsession which later morphs into rage and despair at abandonment. Virgil emphasizes the strength of love and the inevitability of her fate throughout Book IV in his use of language to summon sympathy in the reader.

Furthermore, the episode of Nisus and Euryalus is one of extreme friendship and devotion to comradeship, two qualities that also clearly evoke sympathy in the audience. In the opening lines, it is clear their friendship is admirable: "Near him stood Euryalus, his comrade" (IX, 239-237). Nisus, wiser in years than Euryalus, is prepared to go on a journey alone in order to prevent the death of the younger, more handsome Euryalus. Euryalus is less courageous;

his bravery is characterized as mere hunger for action and honor to such a degree that even Nisus, who marked the path through killing many Rutulians, had to calm him “ when Nisus, with few words (for he could sense his comrade was berserk with lust for carnage) stopped him” (IX, 470-472). Although the expedition failed and the two comrades died because of their extreme devotion to one another, Virgil — in his praise: “ Fortunate pair! If there be any power within my poetry, no day shall ever erase you from the memory of time” (IX, 592-594), and in the lines of the Trojans weeping: “ How much more sad — when they can suddenly make out, impaled, held high, the heads of men known too well by their unhappy comrades” (IX, 625-627) — suggests that these characters were still very much admirable and that their shared death does not fail to create an emotional, poignant event in the epic. Although Euryalus has much devotion to Nisus, a reader cannot help but ask whether Euryalus is wholly devoted to Nisus or more motivated by personal glory since he doesn't even say his farewells to his mother. When his mother grieves upon witnessing his decapitated head, Virgil seems to ask if it was really worth it: “ At once the warmth abandons her poor bones” (IX, 631-632) and “ a moan of sorrow passed through all” (IX, 663), thus evoking the sympathy of the audience. Turnus, undoubtedly, is one of the most complex and remarkably strong characters in the Aeneid. He is even introduced by Virgil in an invocation to the muses: “ inspire me: I must sing of the slaughter and the deaths that Turnus spread with his swords” (IX, 696-702). Virgil's tone in the description of him also seems to be very respectful when he uses two powerful similes – namely, an “ eagle” and “ wolf of Mars” (IX, 745-752). The inevitability of destiny is portrayed once and

for all in Book X when Jupiter allows Juno to alter the events slightly, but urges her to stop and “give up this useless madness” (X, 1105). Virgil creates a sense that even the mighty Jupiter, the father of all gods, feels a little sympathy for the brave Turnus, yet Jupiter is also tired of Juno’s vengeance against the Trojans. Like Dido, Turnus holds his complexity in the fact that he is fated to lose, yet he still continues to fight on the battlefield. Although Turnus is the most probable antagonist, Virgil still allows his audience to feel sympathy for him because a man who knows he will die and yet continues to fight until the very end is indeed heroic, if not more so than Aeneas, who knows he shall at least succeed. Virgil succeeds in creating tension and suspense in the battlefield scenes. Both Dido and Turnus are emotionally passionate; they are driven by immense love, as Turnus desires Lavinia greatly. How can one scorn a man that fights for a woman he loves? Yet love seems to take a back seat to destiny. In due course, there is the fascinating ending in which the readers experience the last sad moments of Turnus’s life. Instead of the epic ending with celebration and victory, it concludes with Aeneas killing Turnus, showing Virgil’s amazing ability to create multi-layered, complex characters in complex situations. Virgil invests Aeneas with flaws and humanity in order to create a real person, but other characters are made real as well. For example, Turnus is not a simple villain since his misdeeds are motivated by his inner flaws: his deep love for Lavinia and his ambition as a fighter on the battlefield. His motivations are not less pure than those of Aeneas. Virgil creates a moment of pity when he is begging on his knees — “then I beg you, pity old Daunus” (XII, 1245-1246) — and although Aeneas has victory, it is not one without a downside or loss.

By using these two characters, especially in the final scene, Virgil teaches a realistic, moral lesson: there will always be loss as a consequence of following one's destiny. Not only have many died, but also the noble hero Aeneas, driven by madness at the sight of Pallas's sword-belt, lost his mercy in the final moment of victory. Here, Virgil sets out to introduce the theme of justice in the form of revenge, a feeling that most people can relate to and sympathize with. Virgil's characters are ultimately just like his readers: complex, multilayered humans who deserve sympathy and pity, scorn and praise. They are real people who face many challenges and cannot always make the right decisions because powers of anger, hatred, and revenge sometimes get the better of them. The most powerful message that comes from the Aeneid, I believe, is that all humans have a noble side, and one must try to pursue this side for the greater good, just as Aeneas did to found Rome.