

The aeneid by virgil and the bacchae by euripides: a comparative study

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Dido Commentary

In Virgil's Aeneid, we follow the journey that Aeneas makes from Troy to found Rome. Along the way, he comes to Carthage, which is a rapidly developing city that serves as a model for what Aeneas wants when he comes to founding his own city. At the head of Carthage is Dido, a beautiful young woman who has captured the attention of large throngs of young men. By looking at the sequence of events that follows the meeting between Aeneas and Dido, we can determine what our overall opinions are of Dido, and whether we feel sympathetic towards her.

It seems logical to suggest that Virgil uses Dido as a vehicle for portraying the disputes between Venus and Juno. Virgil does not appear to care for Dido's wellbeing or wishes. Not only does Venus force Dido to fall in love with Aeneas by sending down her son, Cupid, who shoots Dido with his arrow, but Venus deceives Dido by disguising Cupid as Ascanius, Aeneas' son. This seems a particularly malicious thing to do because Ascanius is only a young boy at this stage, so the effect created is one that an innocent child is performing the will of an evil goddess. Juno also puts her own agenda before Dido. Juno's favourite city is Carthage, and the problem that she has is that the fates have decreed that Rome will be more powerful than and will eventually defeat Carthage. Therefore, Juno takes it upon herself to hinder Aeneas in as many ways as she possibly can. As the goddess of marriage, she thinks to force Aeneas to stay in Carthage (which would subsequently prevent him from founding Rome) on account of his marriage and

commitment to Dido, because Juno knows that, up until now, Aeneas has been a very pious man.

We are encouraged by Virgil to feel a degree of sympathy for Dido based on her back story as well. Virgil tells us that Dido is a widow, and also that it is her controlling brother that has made her so. We feel sorry for Dido because the fact that Aeneas leaves her means that she, having done nothing wrong, will never find love again. Furthermore, Aeneas plans to leave Dido in a very harsh manner. After the scene in the cave, we are given the impression that Dido and Aeneas are married, from the description of the wailing nymphs acting as a chorus, and when Virgil seems to use a reverse form of *antonomasia* as he refers to Aeneas as “ leader of the Trojans” and Dido by her name. This could serve to highlight the differences in their fates as she is (just) Dido, she will remain in Carthage, whereas, because he has the responsibility of the Trojans, Aeneas must move on eventually, thus provoking sympathy for Dido as the emphasis is on the fact that Aeneas will leave. This technique may also refer to the idea of a couple sharing their names at a wedding. Where Virgil would otherwise refer to Dido as “ regina”, he chooses to name her here which seems to show her vision of them being married. Although Aeneas does not seem to acknowledge that they are married, we must feel that his initial plan to leave Dido without telling her is far away from the pious hero to whom we have become accustomed so far in the epic. There is a lot of sympathy to be had for the emotional trauma and madness that Dido is subjected to due to Aeneas’ plan to leave without so much as a goodbye.

Virgil does also give reasons for us to feel no sympathy for Dido. After all, Aeneas is the hero and it is Virgil's duty to paint Aeneas in a good light because of the link that he makes to Augustus. All things considered, Dido does give in to her lust. While it is not up to her whether she has fallen in love with Aeneas, she did swear an oath that she would never remarry after the death of her husband and then go on to break that oath as she is described as a "slave to lust". This is not the behaviour that we expect from a queen and the fact that she neglects the needs of her city and her people adds to the idea that we should not see Dido as an innocent victim.

Dido continues to win no favour from the audience as she leaves Aeneas feeling guilty for what could be described as no good reason. As she throws herself onto the funeral pyre, Dido curses Aeneas and his lineage. This forces the Roman people to dislike her as, by cursing Augustus, she is cursing Rome.

On top of this, Dido seems to waste the huge opportunity that she has in the form of Carthage. While Aeneas is really struggling to find a location to build Rome, Dido has the privilege of being at the head of such a successful city. Virgil uses the simile with the bees to emphasise the efficiency of the work that is happening at Carthage and the fact that Dido neglects the responsibility that she has over the people of Carthage causes the audience to regard her less highly than the initial portrayal of her. Virgil continuously reminds the audience of Dido's power through his referring to Dido as "Regina". The idea that it is lust that causes this decline in Dido's capabilities as a leader is likely a reference to Augustus' attempts to reduce the amount

of adultery in Rome at the time and the image of a great leader being overthrown by her adulterous desires is surely a motivation for the people of Rome to be pious and good citizens.

Overall, I believe that Dido is unfairly portrayed by Virgil. The fact that Aeneas has already been presented as a pious descendant of the gods means that, no matter how noble Dido is, she is likely to struggle to match Aeneas in terms of respect. Therefore, I think that the audience is largely supportive of Aeneas' decision to leave Dido and the level of concern for Dido as a result of Aeneas' departure is low as, particularly at the time of Virgil's writing, the people of Rome are not likely to give too much thought to the mental health of a woman and they are obviously going to be on Aeneas' side because they need him to found Rome.