

Virgil's aeneid: a character analysis of dido

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Reason v. Passion

Throughout Ancient Greek literature, characters often act in extremes.

Heroes find motivation through rage and act with blind, fiery emotion to win their battles; seers and leaders achieve success after reasoning through complex puzzles and problems. Both are usually praised and rewarded for such qualities, but in *The Aeneid* and *The Bacchae*, Virgil and Euripides, respectively, present alternative stories. They demonstrate the other side of lives lived with passionate recklessness or stubborn reason: lives that cause tragedy and end in ruin. Virgil and Euripides show the conflict that occurs when the two forces collide and only one can win. Choosing one over the other is always a difficult choice, one that Aeneas faced several times in *The Aeneid*, and while the Greeks themselves may have prized reason in a time of such new philosophical theories and thoughts, a life without passion was still not easy to achieve. The characters in these poems were depicted as impossible and exaggerated characterizations of people that were able to attain such lives of sole reason without passion or vice versa, and it did not end well. The question that the Greeks, and us, are left to ponder is which life is truly the better one to lead. The Greeks visibly struggled with this in their writing, and every individual who has lived since then has had to choose, whether consciously or not, which half of the dyad is most important to them according to their values and motivations. The answer to this question remains a mystery, because while those who lived by pursuing reason over passion may have appeared to have led better lives in *The Aeneid* than those who chose passion, the fate of Pentheus in *The Bacchae* teaches us that neither is better than the other, and that, instead, a life of

balance and moderation together may result in the most pleasant and fulfilling life.

In The Aeneid, the force of reason is portrayed most clearly through Aeneas. Aeneas showed constant, strong devotion to the gods and fate without hesitation throughout his entire journey. While this enabled him to fulfill his destiny and complete his mission, it was not without tragedy and loss that may have been avoided if Aeneas had balanced his actions with a moderate amount of passion. When pondering whether to leave Dido, Virgil describes Aeneas:

This way and that

He let his mind dart, testing alternatives,

Running through every one. And as he pondered

This seemed the better tactic (105).

His thought process does not include any emotional influences, but instead is based on reason alone. Immediately after figuring out the best course of action, he sailed away from Carthage, leaving Dido in the dust. At first, he struggled with his decision to choose reason over passion each and every time he was faced with a problem. And while he made his decision rather quickly, it still caused him pain to disregard Dido's feelings, as he had feelings for her as well. It is even noted that he "fought down the emotion in his heart," before speaking to her (Virgil, 107). In this moment he is depicted more realistically than most of the other characters, because he actually

stops to contemplate the question of the dyad. If he had complied with Dido's pleas and stayed there with her, or even if he had just explained his decision to leave her with emotion and sympathy instead of solely defending his logic, Dido may not have killed herself. While Aeneas' excessive reason was not his downfall, and he did fare better than those overly passionate, a balance of reason and passion may have saved him from some tragedy and the pain of ignoring his own desires.

Whether out of their control or not, many in *The Aeneid* suffered from too much passion. Dido was the most obviously overwhelmed with passion, although not all on her own. After being influenced by the gods, Dido fell in love with Aeneas quickly and deeply. When he decided to leave her, Dido did not know what to do with herself. She was overcome with emotion, wondering, "What am I saying? Where am I? What madness / takes me out of myself? Dido, poor soul, / your evil doing has come home to you" (Virgil, 117). As opposed to Aeneas reasoning through his choice, the grief of his decision robbed her logic and fogged her mind. Virgil states, "So broken in mind by suffering, Dido caught / her fatal madness and resolved to die" (113). Impulse decisions such as Dido's suicide come straight from a place with no reason. If she had been acting logically, she would have realized she needed to look over her developing city and be there for them as queen. Instead, she ignored all of her progress and accomplishments and could only focus on Aeneas' rejection, choosing passion over any sort of reason. In this, she demonstrates what Virgil clearly opined: that passion, when it overtakes logical reasoning, is self-destructive and overall less fulfilling. Later, Turnus, after being overtaken by a fury, lost his ability to be rational and began to

act only out of rage, even if it meant danger or death. While preparing to face Aeneas, Turnus was described as barely human:

To this length driven by passion, he gave off

A sparkling glow from his whole face, and fire

Flashed from his eyes, as a wild bull at bay

Will give a fearsome bellow and whet his horns

To fury on a tree-trunk... (Virgil, 371).

At this point, nothing mattered to him except fighting the man who wanted to take Lavinia. Adding together the threat Aeneas posed to his reputation, his possessiveness of Lavinia, and the fury instilled in his chest was a recipe for blind rage. Primarily because of influences out of his control, he had no choice but to assume passion was more important than reason. While Aeneas had near-invincible armor and fate on his side, Turnus did not have the logic to avoid what would most likely be death in a one-on-one fight. He pleads, “let me bid my death for honor” just to get the chance to wound Aeneas (Virgil, 369). His passion for war and for Lavinia were his downfall, and, like Dido, inevitably led to his death, reinforcing Virgil’s stance on the mystery of the dyad.

In The Bacchae, there is widespread madness and chaos. However, Pentheus, while attempting to be the voice of reason, was actually ruined by his close-mindedness to the wild and unbelievable. Dionysus advises him:

So you are not moved, Pentheus, by any words of mine!

Nonetheless, in spite of all you've done to me,

I cannot help but tell you,

You must not take up arms against a god (Euripides, 428).

No matter what Dionysus says or does that can prove that he is, indeed, a god, Pentheus will not believe. His reason says that this man is not immortal and that it makes more sense that his mother was simply a liar. After believing this for long enough, Pentheus was not even open to consider the obvious displays of Dionysus' power. He shoved his passion away until he could not hold it back anymore and gave in to his desire to see the Bacchantes in person. This demonstrates how difficult it is for those who desire reason to eliminate emotion from their ideas and decisions. However, it was his stubbornness to disregard his own emotions that led to Dionysus' anger with him and eventually his death, proving that excessive reason can be just as destructive as excessive passion, and perhaps demonstrating the opinion of Euripides that the logical half of the dyad is given too much importance.

While it was not passion out of her own will, Agave, Pentheus' mother, was completely driven by passion after being possessed by Dionysus. She and the other Bacchantes were stripped of any reason and cognition at all and left to wander madly through the forest. This complete possession was the only way to accurately depict someone who has eliminated all reason. Euripides describes her before she killed Pentheus:

She was foaming at the mouth.

Her dilated eyeballs rolled.

Her mind was gone—possessed by Bacchus—

She could not hear her son (441).

Agave did not even have enough reason to listen to and recognize her own son. This was a

punishment given by Dionysus after she had exhibited the same type of reasoning that Pentheus held by believing that Semele, Dionysus' mother, could not have possibly been with a god. After choosing the life of reason over passion, her punishment was a life of the opposite. This passion, instilled in her to the point of madness, was, like in Dido and Turnus, her downfall. While it did not lead to her death, it resulted in the even greater punishment of murdering her son. Like Agave, throughout the play, Dionysus also acted on passion alone. In his overwhelming need to avenge and redeem his late mother, he harmed several people and created chaos throughout the city. He has one and only goal, as he claims, "I'll show myself to him and all of Thebes / a god indeed" (Euripides, 397). He is blind to everything else in his passionate pursuit of this goal and did not stop until it was fulfilled. Like Aeneas, he completed his mission but caused tragedy in the process. He also struggled, like Aeneas, to choose passion over reason, as he attempted to understand and save Pentheus until Pentheus' stubbornness was too much for him to ignore. It may have caused him some pain to give up on this cause, but his focus on the goal was too overwhelming to leave Pentheus to his own mistaken ideas. Thus proves that

Euripides was less decisive than Virgil regarding the dyad, perhaps believing that reason and passion alike were destructive when each acted undiluted.

In both works, the characters struggle to find the perfect balance between reason and passion. While passion ultimately proved to be more destructive of a quality than reason, as Dido and Turnus both died and Agave murdered her son, readers learn that excesses of both should be avoided, because Pentheus also could not escape death. In most instances as well, those who thought logically tended to be male and those who acted emotionally tended to be female. While this may or may not have been intentional, either way it demonstrates the perspective of the Ancient Greeks, and Euripides in particular, on masculinity and gender roles. It seems that females were always susceptible to madness and passion and never logic and reasoning. Because of the lesser view of females at the time, it also may have represented the authors' opinions on which part of the dyad was most important to them. The two forces in each work tended to be in conflict with each other as well. In *The Aeneid*, Aeneas and Turnus were obviously against one another and were physically fighting, and Aeneas and Dido also ended up at odds. In *The Bacchae*, Pentheus and Agave, although mother and son, were in conflict at the end of Pentheus' life. Pentheus was also the main antagonist to Dionysus and the primary obstacle in his mission. These conflicts in both works represent the constant internal struggle between reason and passion in everyone. Humans naturally think logically and act emotionally, and the embodiments of these qualities are personified as the characters in the poems. Many people in reality, although not as extremely as Dido or Agave, tend to lean more on one side than the other, and still

have yet to figure out how to use both in moderation. However, after reading both works, readers have reason and motivation to act differently than the characters who so tragically met their ends after mistakenly living such pleasure-filled or logically-driven lives. While Virgil and Euripides both made clear in their works their decisions, or indecision, surrounding the debate on reason and passion, the mystery of the dyad remains unanswered.