

Who is to blame for
the death of dido?



The remarkable epic poem *The Aeneid*, written by the poet Virgil, tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas as he undertakes an extraordinary journey on to become the founder of Rome. Fate and destiny play an important role as they dictate and influence the events in the lives of this legendary hero, as do the Gods, family and friends. In two instances during the Trojan War, Aeneas' life is spared, and the reasoning is often echoes the phrase: " he is not meant to die", coupled with a number of terrible warnings sent from Jupiter, King of the Gods. To Aeneas, Fate is an auspicious character, which saves him repeatedly throughout *The Aeneid*. The extreme positive influences of Fate in the life of Aeneas, is seen in equal proportion inverted, and balanced, by the portentous fate of the character known as Dido.

The character and story of Dido in *The Aeneid*, is one that stirs human emotion. Here is a queen laden with awful tragedies, revealed to us through Dido herself. First, her husband is murdered at the evil hand of her own brother, and in an act of sheer courage, goes on to continue her life, fleeing from the past and the threats of her brother. She founds a new city, Carthage, where she becomes queen and ruler. At Carthage she becomes a revered figure and her city grows under her leadership. Then at the height of the city's progression come the ships that bear the hero Aeneas, and with it, a downward spiral of ill fate that will eventually consume her. Dido falls completely in love with Aeneas, but when he leaves both her and Carthage to continue his destined course to found Rome, Dido's love completely envelops her to a course of anger, her " furor", and eventual suicide.

At first glance it may appear that Aeneas is at fault for the death of Dido; he left her when she was most vulnerable, and in Dido's own words he is"

improbe.” However, the blame for her death is shared in portions by many of the characters of this particular episode, with one in particular who shoulders the vast majority of responsibility, and within which all responsibility is self-contained; Fate.

Within Dido’s episode of *The Aeneid*, there is a constant employment of dramatic irony by Virgil with the suggestion that Dido’s fate has already been sealed, as she is referred to as the “luckless queen”, and “infelix.” In concurrence with this is when Dido is first described as being in love with Aeneas. However, instead of her love being styled as positive and blissful, the analogy of a “vulnus”, a “wound” is used. This description implies that this love is dangerous and perhaps even fatal, and this is unfortunately proved later in Book IV. However, what is key about this wound is the phrase that accompanies it, “At regina graui iam dudum saucia cura / uulnus alit uenis et caeco carpitur igni.” Translating as “But the queen, wounded long since by intense love, feeds the hurt with her life-blood, weakened by hidden fire,” this phrase reveals more about Dido than it first appears.

We can see that Dido is a self-sacrificing type and appears to have no wish to control the loss of her life, hence indicating that she herself may be responsible for her own death. This is proven in another instance, when her love is prefixed with the term “fatal”, converting the phrase to “fatal love”. The dramatic irony here, apart from clueing the reader as to what is to come of Dido, also states the irreversible course of fate within the lives of people. Dido’s fate has already been determined, and she cannot prevent her ill fortune as her death has been cast by Fate. If there should be someone to blame for Dido’s death, Fate would seem to be the concluding factor. But

Unfortunately, the question is not so easily answered. Fate, although not an individual, is a complicated abstract idea, and the Greek and epic poems treat it as such. Fate has determined what will happen to Dido, and it employs other factors to that end.

Overall, Aeneas appears to be the least responsible for the death of Dido, and he never intends for Dido to fall in love with him. In fact, his looks and figure are augmented by the influence of his mother, who improves Aeneas' complexion, build and facial features. Secondly, the "marriage" between Dido and Aeneas was never a marriage by will on Aeneas' part as he proclaims "he never held the bridal torch", hence, he never intended for a relationship or any formal ties. Although Aeneas did partake in consummating a relationship with Dido, but there was never a ceremony, never a formal proclamation of marriage. Aeneas, in a sense, is as equal a victim as Dido is with the fictitious relationship that is plotted by the immortals, except from the fact that Virgil does not depict him as being wounded by Venus as Dido is, and appears to have more of a choice in the matter.

He was never made aware by Venus and Juno in of the situation that brought the two together and lured Dido into a spell of enchanted, consuming, love. Aeneas is least to blame because he did not create the situation nor did he ask for it, but it was heaped upon him by the gods, and also it seems, Fate. However, there should be some responsibility held to Aeneas for being so unmoved by the desperate pleas of Dido, especially when she says she is "moribundam" -about to die. We also see that her may have had the power to ease the queens suffering from Book IV, where Aeneas is described as "

lenire dolentem solando cupit et dictis auertere curas,” – that he wishes to “ease her sadness by comforting her and to turn aside pain with words.”

However, he never acts upon this desire thereby putting himself forward for the blame of her death, because he may have been able to avert it.

Furthermore, Anna, Dido’s sister, seems to be just as responsible as Aeneas, if not more. Whilst Aeneas does nothing to mollify Dido, it is Anna’s words and actions that directly result in Dido taking her own life. Dido consults Anna first before pursuing a relationship with Aeneas, who encourages her to do so when she advises “ Dearer to your sister than daylight is, will you wear out your life young as you are, in solitary mourning, never to know sweet children, or the crown of joy that Venus brings?”, also incites Dido’s patriotic side, when she declares “ What a city you’ll see here, sister, what a kingdom rise, with such a husband!”, hereby pushing forwards their relationship.

Aside from this advice, Anna also inadvertently aids Dido with building a pyre, which Dido ultimately uses to end her life. Although Anna did not know how Dido would use the pyre, Anna knew at this point that Dido was on the edge of madness and could have taken care of Dido, and helped her through this difficult time. Dido herself realises that Anna is a reason for her predicament, when she cries “ Sister, you are the one who gave way to my tears in the beginning, burdened a mad queen with sufferings”. Although Anna’s role is unintentional, she is not free from responsibility.

However, the Gods are not exempt from blame in the demise of Dido. Both Juno and Venus use Dido for their own ends, as Venus uses her power over love to summon Cupid, who enchants Dido with a powerful spell of love over

Aeneas, and Juno manufactures a romantic setting to seal the love that Dido has over Aeneas. Both of these goddesses abuse the susceptibility of Dido's emotional state, and coerce Dido covertly into a deceptive love affair.

Their manoeuvrings result directly to the madness that poisons Dido, and which causes her to take her own life, as without these two, Dido may not have felt anything for Aeneas, experienced as she was in turning men down. Aside from Venus and Juno, Jupiter is also partly responsible, commanding Aeneas to continue his journey to Italy, uncaring for the toll this would have for Dido. At this point, Virgil as the writer encourages this viewpoint as, when Mercury vanishes into thin air, the breezes are described as "harsh," perhaps foreshadowing Dido's eventual death. Aeneas, being merely mortal, has to oblige.

Finally, the most accountable for the death of Dido, is Dido herself. Though this sentence may appear as a mere cliché, we must look at the bare facts: Dido stabs Dido; therefore Dido is responsible for her own death. But, aside from this emotionally detached perspective, it seemed at the very end, directly before Dido stabs herself with Aeneas' sword, that she is in a rational state of mind and not completely consumed by madness. She appears to weigh her options, rationally, and considers suicide as the right course of action for her as she ponders: "Look now, what can I do?"

Turn once again to the old suitors, only to be laughed at; begging a marriage with Numidians whom I disdained so often? Then what? Trail the Ilian ships and follow like a slave Command of Trojans?" From this, we can see that humiliation appears to be her main reason for suicide. However, guilt may

also play a significant part in her decision. From the third dimension that Virgil adds – Sychaeus . He is only a memory to be sure, but real enough in Dido's mind to have an important function in the narrative. Sychaeus by his spiritual omnipresence induces in Dido the feelings of betrayal and guilt to which she succumbs by suicide when Aeneas' departure removes all her hopes of any semblance of honour through marriage. Suicide is a choice that can only be made by the individual. Dido makes this choice on her own, by herself. Therefore, ultimately she is the one who can claim the most responsibility for her fateful action.

It would appear therefore, that there are several factors which contribute to Dido's end; the gods, fate, Aeneas, and her own actions. Dido is a victim of fate, and her fate had a tragic end foretold for her. Possibly the least responsible is Aeneas himself, for he is placed in his position by external and more powerful forces. Anna, although her actions are not intended to cause harm, influences Dido the most, allowing Dido to feel more confident with pursuing a relationship with Aeneas. It is also Anna's pyre that provides the setting for Dido's suicide. The immortals also share the blame; both Venus and Juno create the illusion of love for Dido, and cause her to fall in love with Aeneas. So, who is to blame for the death of Dido? Perhaps the most likely character is Dido herself. She as an individual commits the act and commits herself to the Underworld. No one else could have done that for her.