

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Virgil

DIDO (emotional)

Overview In 23 B.C. the Roman poet Virgil read selected books of his great epic of the history of the Italian people, the *Aeneid*, to the Emperor Augustus and his first lady, Octavia. This was an appropriate occasion, because the epic celebrated the pageant of historical development, on the Italian peninsula, and ultimately its expression in the new imperial reign of Octavian, proclaimed emperor in 29 B.C. The grandeur of the Roman drive is particularly underscored by the romantic self-discipline shown by Aeneas when he is faced with the distraction of a beautiful Libyan Queen, Dido, who longs for him to build his kingdom in her land.

Character At root, an ancient goddess, Dido became known—though barely mentioned before Vergil—as the first Queen of Libya, roughly the area of present day Tunisia. She was, according to legend, given a parcel of land, to settle her people on that shore, by the native King Iarbas, who forever after fretted that she refused his offers of marriage. It was as she was settling and starting to build up her capital, a splendid urban vision, that Aeneas and his men, thrown about by a wild storm, on their way to Italy, were driven ashore on the coast of Libya. It was there that play out the most intensely human of love affairs, that of Dido and Aeneas.

Anguished Thanks to the ministrations of the goddess Aphrodite, Dido comes before us smitten by the passion of love for Aeneas. Thanks to this 'divine intervention' Dido is not conventionally love struck, but rather is driven mad by her passion. 'Unlucky Dido, burning, roamed through all the city, like a doe hit by an arrow shot from far away...' Like the doe she runs from side to side, but cannot free herself of the painful shaft in her side. She stings with a burning love which will burn her up before her passion has left her.

Beautiful Juno (supporting Dido) and Aphrodite (driving Aeneas' mission) adjudicate the fate of Aeneas and Dido, deciding that a compromise of marriage might keep the lady alive and Aeneas on track. Juno arranges an outing, in which Dido and Aeneas will have an opportunity to bond. Dido appeared in fashion: 'a short Sidonian cloak edged in embroidery caught about her...her hair tied up in gold.' Beautiful and natural she walked to meet Aeneas, who was walking 'with sunlit grace upon him.' One feels on the edge of a fairy story, in which love will solve all problems.

Emotional The walking party—all the retinues are accompanying—are soon caught in a violent thunderstorm, under cover of which—and by goddess-collusion—the lovers find themselves together in a single cave. 'Dido had no further qualms...she thought no longer of a secret love but called it marriage...under that name she hid her fault.' Marriage it hardly was, for it was marriage only for her, and the Rumors which immediately set it set up a buzz of real marriage preparation—which is counter to Juno's larger plan, and Aeneas' mission. The god Mercury is sent in, to remind Aeneas not to lose sight of where he is going.

Driven Dido senses a plot, to counteract her marriage plans and relation to Aeneas; it is in the air, 'for who deceives a woman in love.' 'Evil Rumor..brought word to her in her distracted state, of ships being rigged. Dido is driven insane by this rumor, and courses the streets of her city 'all aflame with rage.' She is as it were a Bacchant 'driven wild by emblems shaken, when the mountain revels of the odd year possess her.' We see Dido driving herself remorselessly into a corner of self-destruction.

Parallels Dido, both emotional and pathetic, has proven attractive to artists of all kinds: literary, musical, and painterly. Euripides, who of course preceded Virgil by four hundred years, might almost seem to have had Virgil in mind, in creating a Medea whose jealousy and vengeance resemble those of Dido. Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (1593) ups the passion level even higher than Virgil, and brings down the queen in a passionate blaze. Henry Purcell's opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, (1680) peaks brilliantly in

the tragic Lament of Dido; while in painting Pierre-Narcisse Guerin captured (1815) the pathos of of first love, as Aeneas recounts to Dido the tales of his travels from Troy, while she reclines, enchanted.

Discussion questions

What is Virgil's attitude toward Dido's behavior? Does he fault her as a seductress? Does he feel compassion for her as a jilted lover?

What is Dido's attitude toward Aeneas? Is it pure passion? Is it passion mixed with geopolitical canniness, as she considers Aeneas' usefulness to her in nation building?

At what turning point does Dido began to go mad with passion and fury? Who and what is Rumor? Do you find the depiction of growing madness convincing?