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HUST 323
Professor Williamson
5 October 2023

“Dido is Burning”

The phrase “Dido is burning” reveals different representations of who Dido is as a character, but it also shows her transformation when the understanding of the word “burning” changes throughout Virgil’s epic, *The Essential Aeneid*. We first see Dido as having a motivational, devotional fire that is laid out through her passion for her people and kingdom (1.610-25). When she gets stuck by Cupid, this passion morphs into bursting compassion and love for Aeneas (4.1-7). Ultimately, this love soon turns into her own destruction; thus, changing the meaning of ‘burning’ a third time to a more literal sense when she kills herself in front of the burning pyre (4.744-822). Through her own transformation and the polysemous word “burning”, we are able to explore the different traits and actions that make Dido a character of complexity and passion in all of the stages of her short-lived presence.

Before Dido is struck by Cupid, she is already bursting with many traits that embody a true Queen and give her the motivational fire to be an amazing ruler. She is described as a strong, independent woman who rules fairly and justly. “The Queen was making her way to the temple, / The most beautiful Dido, and as she walked / A throng of youths crowded around her” (1.610-2). First regarded as “the Queen”, followed by “Dido” shows the full respect that the citizens, but also Aeneas, has for her. He honors her title and all of the traits that come with it, then recognizes her beauty afterwards. When the people crowded around her as she was going to the temple, the respect, love, and strong leadership that she exudes is appreciated by all of her citizens, and Aeneas recognizes this as well. She is even compared to Diana, a Roman goddess

(1. 613-8). Aeneas proceeds to identify how she interacts with her people. “She was making laws for her people, / Distributing duties or assigning them by lot” (1. 624-5). She delegates, but it is clear that her people respect and admire her. Dido exudes everything a good queen should be for her kingdom: passion, strength, knowledge, power, beauty, empathy, independence, and support. She shines with the passion, motivation, and determination that makes her kingdom as beautiful and strong as she is. Her motivational fire to make her kingdom great is what makes her such a beautiful, complex, and appealing character before she becomes a victim of the gods’ wrath.

After Dido is struck by Cupid, the love for her country transforms into the love for Aeneas; thus, changing the underlying meaning of ‘burning’. Instead of being in love with making her kingdom great, she is falling for Aeneas. For Dido, “...the flame / Eats her soft marrow, and the wound lives, / Silent beneath her breast” (4.78-80). This flame of passion for Aeneas is truly consuming her. Eating away at her heart and mind, she feels this love to be torturous and overwhelming. Dido expresses that her burning passion stays quite inside her and is fully taking over her soul, specifically her heart. Once again, it is said, “Dido is burning with love, her very bones enflamed” (4.117-8). This love for Aeneas fully engulfs her, setting her heart on fire. It is not just an emotion, but a physical state that she finds herself in. This love is so much stronger than anything she has felt before, including the love she felt for her late husband. She says, “The man who first joined himself to me / Has taken my love with him to the grave” (4.34-5). Even after her previous husband died, she did not feel this way about him and his departure. The love she had for him died with him and is in “the grave”. This love she is feeling for Aeneas is entirely apart and is eating her alive, more so than the death of her husband. Her instability and passion here reveal how even powerful queens can succumb to the gods' will and can suffer greatly.

Not only is her love physically consuming her, but it is causing her to be mentally driven insane, which continues the stage of burning love in her transformation. In this figurative sense, her passion encapsulates the instability of her mind that follows when the gods force her into ‘burning’ with love for Aeneas. While this love is consuming her heart, it is also affecting her mind. Virgil writes, “She went out of her mind, / Raging through the city *as wild and furious* / *As a maenad*...” (4.337-339). Again, it’s said, “She wanders all through the city in her misery, / Raving mad” (4.81-2). This torture is devouring her from the inside out. Her people notice how she is going insane and has clearly changed from who she once was. Then, she’s compared to a maenad, which was a raving, crazy female follower of Bacchus, the god of pleasure. Not only is she expressing how her heart and mind are going insane with love, but she is physically acting upon her madness and running rampant through the city. Jove’s wife even mentioned that Dido seemed “so lovesick / That her good name no longer mattered to her / As much as her passion” (4.106-8). Everyone is noticing their once powerful, strong queen was deteriorating into a vessel of lust before their eyes. Dido’s name, status, and all of the traits that once were associated with her, didn’t matter to her anymore. Only her love for Aeneas mattered. She was even putting the health of her kingdom aside to follow this passion. This transformation she undergoes from a strong queen to a ‘burning’, mad woman shows us her full transition to instability that the god’s invoked upon her.

It is important to recognize Dido’s past with love to understand why she may have been consumed so much by this passion that led to her destruction. Against her will, she is forced to love Aeneas after she swore herself to never love again. She explains to her sister how she feels and unveils the war she is having in her heart about what plagues her. She says, “If I were not unshakeable in my vow / Never to pledge myself in marriage again” then she just might have

married Aeneas (4.18-22). While she does recognize that she admires Aeneas, she is steadfast in her vow to never love again. Her loyalty shines through here, which makes it more tragic when this loyalty and strength are taken from her. Breaking this vow caused inner turmoil and guilt of loving another after she swore to herself, the gods, and her late husband that she would never marry another. This was another contributing factor to her overwhelming feelings. However, after she was struck by Cupid, the love for Aeneas fully consumed her and drove her even crazier than before. Her overwhelming feelings of love and guilt ultimately led to her destruction.

The last stage of Dido's transformation was her committing suicide at the flaming pyre, leading to her destruction becoming the last meaning of "burning". After deciding to end her suffering, she tricks her sister into putting everything in place for her to display her death publicly. "With these words on her lips her companions saw her / Collapse onto the sword, saw the blade / Foaming with blood and her hands spattered" (4.769-771). As she dies, her entire kingdom is watching and listening to her send ill will to the Trojans and Aeneas. While she is lying there dying, Virgil writes, "And flames rolled through the houses of men / And over the temples of the gods" (4.778-9). While Aeneas was sailing away, Dido died by her own hand while the city around her went up in flames. Once again, she is represented as "burning". Everything that she has worked hard to build is also burning with her. Ironically, this line points out that the burning passion that was inflicted upon Dido came back to burn the gods and men as well, both of which were the cause of her pain. She also calls out for revenge as she dies, which seems to be granted. Literally and figuratively, Dido was burning in her death through love and hate for both the gods and men, specifically to those who wronged her.

The transformation of Dido explains her transition to instability due to the power the gods abused and the different definitions of burning as motivation, love, and destruction. Originally,

Dido is strong, powerful, and rules her country with all the traits a Queen should embody. She represents a motivated woman who loves her kingdom and rules with dignity. However, after Cupid abuses his power and strikes her with love for Aeneas, she becomes unstable, mentally and physically. She completely abandons her job as queen to follow her passion and lust that fully encompasses her. While it seems that she is weak in the name of love, she is only mortal. While she has power, she doesn't compare to the gods. The significance of humanity is prevalent here. Dido is crippled into humanness instead of power. Her character is created to build sympathy for the unfortunate, innocent women who are overpowered by the gods across literature. While she is very humble about her power before she is struck by Cupid, she is still a victim of ancient Roman power dynamics from the gods and male inflicted misogyny. Dido is also physically a victim of Cupid's arrow. Her insanity, guilt, and rage drove her to commit suicide. It's not just about how she died, but the visual of her going up in flames that really encompasses the metaphorical "Dido is burning" line (4.80). Virgil shows her burning in all aspects, and unfortunately, physically as well. In all cases, Dido suffered both mentally and physically. Of the heart and mind, the once strong, stable leader is burned away into a pile of ash.

Love and hate, things that could potentially drive someone to madness, aren't the only factor here that plays a part in her burning. Her vow to never love again was forcefully broken, her choices were taken from her, and her mind and heart were invaded with love, anger, and passion. This manipulation of both Dido's heart and mind sadly drove her to commit suicide to be relieved of this torture. Her connection with the word 'burning' encompasses her transition in her identity and character but also in the word itself. Virgil's constant word choice of burning, flames, fire, etc. represents Dido as a character of the same disposition: strong, bursting, and

passionate. Dido's entire presence in *The Aeneid* is a metaphor for how she burns, what caused this burning, and the effect of this burning on herself and others.

Works Cited

Virgil. *The Essential Aeneid*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo, Hackett Publishing, 2006.