

# Destiny, Desire, and the Hero in Virgil's Aeneid

## Part One: Drawing upon Love

by Christina Vester

In the first three books of Virgil's *Aeneid*, there are two characters with the potential to be described as heroes: Dido, queen of Carthage, and Aeneas, prince of Troy. Both are noble and brave exiles. Both have their fates declared by the gods. Both strive to build a strong settlement for the people whom they led in flight from their home cities. They meet, and become guest-friends, lovers, and partners, forming a relationship that destroys one, and strengthens the other. Out of the two, only Aeneas can be called a hero. Because he chooses his destiny over his desire, he establishes the small city that will grow into Rome, the nation that brings a system of law to the entire world. Because Dido chooses love, she destroys herself and her people. She commits suicide, and in so doing, leaves behind a leaderless city that is partially built, and thus open to attack from the surrounding peoples. Furthermore, she lays a heavy burden upon the Carthaginians by calling down a curse upon them. They must forever hate the Trojans, and enact this hatred in an everlasting feud.

Why Aeneas benefits and Dido suffers, is the topic of two brief discussions. This one, the first, explains how Aeneas becomes a hero. He gains strength, acclaim, and respect by accepting his destiny, by choosing Dido, and by surrendering her. It is the issue of choice that decides heroism in the *Aeneid*. Because Aeneas accepts his destiny, because he takes up his fate, he wins. But I am ahead of myself. First, I must show that destiny involves a choice on the part of mortals for this epic does not allow us to think that fate is a fixed thing. While fate is divinely predetermined and decreed, mortals play a crucial part by either accepting or denying their destiny. Free will exists and Aeneas is evidence of this. Second, I will argue that Aeneas is fully aware of his fate, and that he continuously makes decisions that fall in line with, or derail, his divinely decreed end. Lastly, I will make the case that Aeneas takes the title of hero because he finds love, security, and happiness, *and* with a noble, loving, and ambitious queen at that. His choice of Dido as consort brings him acclaim for he makes an exceptional choice in partners. Granted, he abandons her in exchange for an uncertain future, one described to him as full of struggle, pain, and solitary leadership, but only because he knows that fulfilling his destiny will lay the foundation for glory, happiness, and power for his descendants. Like Spock in Star Trek, he accepts that "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one."

Aeneas does not easily accept his destiny. The end of his home city, Troy, is a terrible one. In his account, grief was heaped upon grief. The infamous wooden horse, pregnant with heavily armed men, was dragged into Troy. The Greeks descended upon the city in the dead of night, and attacked the Trojans caught off guard. The city was soon burning. All the while, Aeneas slept. And then to him in his dreams came the ghost of Hector, mightiest of Troy's warriors, wounded, sad, with his hair and beard blood-clotted. He told Aeneas that the city had entrusted her household gods to his care, and that he must hurry,

flee, flee, and, after lengthy wandering, found a new city (2.293-95). Aeneas immediately rushed off into battle, intent upon killing as many Greeks as possible before being killed. He then saw his king slaughtered by the psychotic young braggart Pyrrhus, the priestess Cassandra dragged sacrilegiously from her sacred temple, and fellow Trojans huddling at altars, awaiting slavery or death. He lost his wife Creusa. All around him Trojans tried vainly to muster a military response with whatever was at hand, roof tiles, or shreds of ceiling beams. Trojans were massacred in great number, or enslaved, and the city's wealth was heaped into booty piles. All that remained of that night was for morning to make visible the utter destruction of the city. Despite Aeneas' desire to seize glory by killing, and to die while killing, death is not his fate. While the city is falling, he is given instructions from those whom he can not ignore, or discount. The ghost of Hector, the spirit of his wife Creusa, his mother - the goddess Venus, and two god-sent omens, explicitly tell him to abandon his burning city and fellow Trojans to their doom. Our hero again receives orders from divine sources during his travels. Apollo's oracle at Delos, and the Trojan household gods both explain that he must re-establish Troy in Italy. When he and the Trojans have been at sea for some time, he reaches the Greek city of Buthrotum, and again his fate is declared by Apollo. As the following words show, the god is explicitly clear that the voyage he has undertaken is his destiny and will of the gods.

Nate dea (nam te maioribus ire per altum  
auspiciis manifesta fides; sic fata deum rex  
sortitur uoluitque uices, is uertitur ordo),  
pauca tibi e multis, quo tutior hospita lustres  
aequora et Ausonio possis considerare portu,  
expediam dictis; prohibent nam cetera Parcae  
scire Helenum farique uetat Saturnia Iuno. (3.374-80)

Goddess-born, manifestly approved by solemn authorities is your pledge to voyage over the vast expanse. Thusly does the king of the gods assign your fate, and has determined its turns, and this is its unfolding. To you, few things of many shall I reveal, in order that you may travel the foreign seas in greater safety, and settle in an Ausonian port. Other things do the Fates forbid me to know, and other things does Saturnian Juno restrict me from saying.

Jupiter, the most powerful of the gods, likewise declares that Aeneas will found a new settlement that will develop over time into Rome, a nation that will have "empire without end" (*imperium sine fine*, 1.279). In short, we are confronted with a man who knows that he is marked out as *the one* who will save Troy from absolute annihilation by establishing the fledgling state of early Rome. Faced with divine messages, he has shouldered a far more difficult task than rushing into a military fray and killing until he too is killed. He has subordinated his own pain and desire for revenge for the safekeeping of Troy's household gods and ragged refugees. After taking up his destiny, Aeneas doggedly pursues it. When he first appears in the *Aeneid* he and some of the Trojans have been washed onto an unknown shore after surviving a violent storm. He sets off at once to survey the unknown land, and soon returns with food for his fellow refugees. Confronted

with their feelings of weary sadness, he offers the following words of solace:

reuocate animos maestumque timorem  
mittite; forsan et haec olim meminisse iuuabit.  
per uarios casus, per tot discrimina rerum  
tendimus in Latium, sedes ubi fata quietas  
ostendunt; illic fas regna resurgere Troiae.  
durate, et uosmet rebus seruare secundis. (1.202-7)

Recall your spirit, and dismiss your sorrow, your fear,  
and perhaps one day it will be pleasing to recall these days.  
Through shifting events, through so many trials of dangers,  
we reach for Latium, where fate promises a quiet  
home. There lies our destiny to raise a second Troy.  
Hold on, and maintain your strength with positive thoughts.

Aeneas understands that both gods and men have a part to play in the founding of Rome. He knows that it is fate (fata), and divine will (fas) that the Trojans make their way to Italy. His response to this knowledge is to worship the gods constantly, to sacrifice and to pray to them, and to accept their messages. Thus do the Trojans sacrifice upon reaching the shore's safety (1.174-79). When Aeneas meets a young woman whom he believes is a goddess, he prays at once for guidance for the entire group. He recounts that he has been following his destiny (fata data) by tracking the path laid out by the goddess Venus (1.382). Having abandoned Troy and begun his journey, he seeks and receives guidance from the god Apollo on Delos (3.84-98). Aeneas also heeds a message given to him in his sleep by the household gods (3.147-71), and in doing so, has to uproot the fledgling city put down mistakenly on Crete. Finally, Aeneas prays to the god Apollo at Buthrotum and is given clear instructions for making the journey to Italy. His constant contact with gods and his reception of divine messages underline his dedication to carrying out his journey.

Aeneas demonstrates great dedication to his fellow travelers as well. By doing this, he shows that he knows that more is required of him than simply believing that fate will carry out the foreordained end. Instead, he carefully tends to his fellow Trojans in order to ensure that they make it to Italy and play their part in founding Rome. After their shipwreck, he first finds food for a communal feast and then builds up confidence in his compatriots by describing their journey as a shared destiny that might be remembered with pleasure in the future (1.207-07). In the morning, Aeneas sets off to survey the land in order that he might bring back a full report to his Trojans. Upon meeting Venus disguised as a Tyrian, he immediately lays a heartfelt request before her:

sis felix nostrumque leues, quaecumque, labor  
et quo sub caelo tandem, quibus orbis in oris  
iactemur doceas: ignari hominumque locorumque  
erramus uento huc vastis et fluctibus acti. (1.330-33)

Please, be propitious, and lighten our burden, whoever you are,

and tell us beneath which heaven, onto which shores of earth  
we have been cast: for we are wandering, knowing neither  
people nor place, driven here by wind and immense waves.

In this passage, as in many others, Aeneas uses the first person plural verb form to join himself with the Trojans. Although fully aware that he is leader fulfilling a special destiny, fellow refugees are always included in Aeneas' prayers, and he shares in all the physical dangers and deprivations they encounter. His last thoughts at night and upon waking are for his compatriots and their safety. Aeneas ensures that they are replenished physically, spiritually, and emotionally. He hunts for his people, he prays for them, and he hosts feasts, Trojan Games, and other events in order to forge a bond strong enough to withstand the difficulties yet to come. He tends to both the gods and his people, for both are required for him to establish Rome.

Dido is definitely not necessary for the founding of early Rome. Matter of fact, by virtue of having begun her settlement in North Africa, she and her gracious welcome prove a significant obstacle to Aeneas' fulfillment of his destiny. She is, in many ways, the ideal counterpart to Aeneas. She is an exile, also lost her spouse, and has chosen to establish a new city for herself and the small group of compatriots she fled with. As will be shown, she reflects back the piety and humanity that Aeneas is renowned for. Dido has set down important, and highly significant, foundations. She has left no element of a civilized city out. A mighty temple to Juno was raised over the skull of a spirited horse, for by this marker the goddess made it known that the Carthaginian nation would flourish in wealth and war (1.441-45). In addition to showing her piety by building a temple rich in art, bronze metalwork, and offerings, Dido demonstrates excellent foresight in choosing other building projects. The list of construction projects already underway is instructive. First to be described are the towers, great buildings where once hovels stood, city gates, paved streets, walls, citadel, and houses being planned (1.421-25). The citadel, walls, and gates provide security to the city and its citizens. Paved streets, great buildings, and houses provide dwellings, thoroughfares, and work and/or gathering places for the Tyrians. What is more, all of these things are being undertaken at once and this is strong evidence to the organizational force and will of Dido. That the Carthaginians are a law-abiding people is proven by their choosing of laws, magistrates, and a sacred senate (1.426). By digging out a harbour (1.427), Dido declares her intentions to make her city an economic and military naval power. By laying foundations for a theatre (1.427), Dido makes the claim that Carthage will be a centre of culture. It is no wonder that Aeneas, after watching the city buzzing with organized activity, first dares to hope for salvation and better luck (1.451-52).

Dido is every bit as beautiful as her city. When Aeneas first sees her, she is likened to the goddess Diana dancing gracefully amidst a thousand Oreads (1.498-500). While a most beautiful woman (1.496), Dido is all business. Aeneas watches her take a seat on the temple porch, and then proceed to issue laws and ordinances (1.505). She also allots, in equal portion, the tasks to be undertaken (1.507-08). When some captured Trojans are brought to her, Aeneas watches as the queen listens intently to their account, and then generously offers a guide, supplies, or an equal portion in the city (1.569-74). When

Aeneas reveals himself, the queen graciously treats the prince and his fellow travelers to an immense feast, but not before she orders a generous thanksgiving ceremony to take place in the temples. Her piety and generosity soon win Aeneas over. Within a short period of time, he, like Dido, is dressed in luxurious purple and gold (4.261-64). Soon he is supervising the construction of Carthage's towers and new buildings (4.261). Aeneas and the Trojans under his leadership are happy and safe, engaged in feasts, hunts, late night story-telling, and city building. Their mission, however, is in grave danger.

Because Aeneas chooses to surrender Dido and Carthage, and all the security, love, and happiness that accompanies the queen and her new city, he becomes our hero. Because he tears his compatriots away from a comfortable and kind life, all for the sake of carrying out a uncertain but glorious destiny, he is our hero. Having long worked in tandem with the gods, he does not dismiss their injunctions when they are offered. When Zeus rebukes him for forgetting his own destiny and consequently, destroying his son's fate and hopes, Aeneas quickly departs the city. His exit is not particularly graceful, or kind to Dido, but his speedy response testifies that he is pious, courageous, and capable of shouldering the burden of founding Rome. Pain is his. Responsibility is his. Like Spock, he is more than capable of saving the many if only a few like himself are sacrificed. His choices show that he is worthy of the title of hero.

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Part Two: Destroyed by Love  
(coming soon)