

(ii) Dido's downfall - 2014

“Temples and prayers are no use to a woman who is madly in love.”

(Virgil, *Aeneid* Book 4)

(a) Analyse the role of the gods in the doomed love affair of Dido and Aeneas.

From the very beginning, even before meeting each other, the Gods were influencing the relationship between Dido and Aeneas. In Book I of the *Aeneid* when the hero and his Trojan companions wash up on the shores near Carthage, Jupiter send the messenger god Mercury ahead to the Carthaginian Queen. He does this to inspire her to welcome the Trojans with open arms and good intentions as they only wish to continue their journey to Italy. When Aeneas and the Trojans arrive, she does so.

Aeneas' mother, the goddess Venus also plays a part in their love affair. She is weary of the patron goddess of Carthage, Juno, interfering and turning Dido against Aeneas, to further his suffering and prevent him from reaching Rome. Venus (as the Goddess of Love) sends her other son Cupid, disguised as Aeneas' son Ascanius, to fill the Queen's heart with love for Aeneas. Dido is so infatuated by the Trojan hero that she is unable to harm him. Hence the attraction begins on Dido's side. She is further entranced by Aeneas when he goes into the palace looking even more handsome than usual (of course, thanks to the spells of Venus.)

Juno also attempts to influence their affair and turn it into a marriage. While Juno dislikes Aeneas for being a Trojan, she is also aware of his fate to found a new city in Italy/Hesperia, which is fated to destroy Carthage, her patron city. The Queen of the Gods suggest a truce with Venus, declaring that both Aeneas and Dido should marry. Juno knows that not only will a union with the Trojans strengthen Carthage but will also ensure that Rome is never founded by Aeneas. Venus understands that this is a deception by Juno to prevent her son's destiny, and cleverly says that if Jupiter agrees to the match, she will follow suit. Juno however decides to complete the first phase of her plan without consulting him which has major consequences on the honour of Dido.

While out hunting, Juno creates a storm which forces Dido and Aeneas into the same cave. While they are there, Juno sanctifies the two in “marriage” or at least attempts to. Virgil gives a vague description as to what happens in the cave, suggesting that the two were not actually officially married. This act by Juno managed to falsely convince Dido and she “surrendered to her desires” which has dire consequences on her fate at the end of Book IV.

After this event, a period follows when Dido, entranced by Aeneas, begins to neglect her city and her duty as Queen. Aeneas too remains in Carthage and fails to fulfil his destiny of founding Rome. That is until King Iarbus hears from Rumour of the Carthaginian Queen’s lover affair with Aeneas after he had been refused by her in marriage. The king brings this news to the attention of his father, Jupiter who immediately sends Mercury once more down with a message. This time however, it is for Aeneas. Mercury implores Aeneas not to abandon his destiny and the destiny of his son Ascanius. Aeneas is urged to leave Carthage and Dido behind. Aeneas’ piety and duty to his son prompts him to prepare to leave immediately, but he makes his way to Dido to deliver the news. Aeneas’ divine destiny which is constantly influenced by the Gods has a lasting impact on his affair with Dido.

When Dido hears of Aeneas’ plans to depart Carthage from Rumour, she is sent into a lovestruck tantrum, enraged but also desperate. When Aeneas arrives, she calls him a traitor and reminds him that she is hated by all of Libya now for her relationship with him. Aeneas in response tells her of the Gods will and states that they were never officially married. This revelation sends Dido further into a frenzy and she promises to haunt him. Aeneas hastily leaves, being encouraged by Mercury as he fears the Queen may attack the Trojans. The consequences of the Gods interference in their love affair are revealed.

Dido meets her end willingly on a funeral pyre of Aeneas’ belongings. She kills herself on their shared bed with his sword after uttering a curse of eternal hatred between their two peoples. The once strong and confident Queen is manipulated and destroyed by the Gods, who used her like a pawn for their own intentions. The orchestration of Dido and Aeneas’ doomed love affair is a prime example of the cruelty of the Gods and their influence in mortal affairs.

(b) To what extent is Dido responsible for her own downfall?

Dido does not play a major role in her own downfall. It is primarily the Gods who are to blame. Venus uses the queen to aid her son’s destiny and provide him with shelter. She is the one who fills Dido’s heart with love in the first place and makes her fall madly in love with Aeneas. Juno too uses Dido for personal means and guides the queen to her doom. Her attempt to marry the two

backfires immensely and instead ruins the queen's reputation in Carthage and abroad. When Aeneas leaves, Dido is essentially left with nothing as she is humiliated. This prompts her to commit suicide. Finally, Jupiter sending Mercury to remind Aeneas of his destiny also impacts Dido's fate as Aeneas is too pious to betray the will of the gods. Jupiter's will to keep Aeneas on his path to his destiny means that Aeneas cannot stay in Carthage with Dido.

While there is no doubt that Dido was manipulated by the Gods, to some extent she herself can be blamed. Dido had previously made a vow to her dead husband Sychaeus that she would not remarry any man. However, her emotions, while encouraged by the Gods, do cloud her judgement. She allows the Gods, as well as the advice of her sister Anna, to concede herself and break her vow. While it is difficult to blame her, to some extent, Virgil intentionally suggests we should. Queen Dido is driven by her emotions and willing to break a vow unlike the hero Aeneas. A vow like that at the time would have been held at high regard and breaking such a vow would be seen as having dire consequences. Dido knowing this but still doing so can attest to her part in her own downfall.