

*I sing of arms
and a bad, bad man
Aeneas: Malus Vir*

by

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“I hate Aeneas with a fiery passion.
I made a website about just how much I hate him.”



Abandoning Dido



and more...

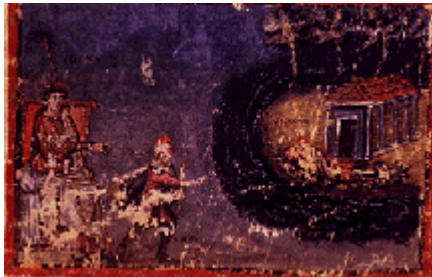
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Abandoning Dido

Probably Aeneas' most heinous act in the Aeneid is his abandonment of Dido (aka Elissa), Queen of Carthage. Not only does he abandon her, he drives her to suicide. In order to fully understand the seriousness of this abandonment, it is necessary to take a look at the back story of Queen Dido.

Dido was originally a Phoenician princess named Elissa. She was married to Sychaeus, whom her brother, Pygmalion, killed. In older myths, Elissa killed herself rather than marry another man. Vergil took this myth and made her flee from her home city of Tyre to the future site of Carthage. There, she tricked one of the rulers, Iarbas, into giving her a site to found a city. Carthage came to be the favored city of Juno; "Samos even was second; and here she kept her arms, and here she kept her chariot, and here, if the fates allowed, she yearned to see a city ruling the world."



Aeneas' ships are washed ashore at Carthage by a great storm at sea. This storm is not an accident, for Juno, queen of the gods, asked Aelous, god of wind and cloudbursts, to raise a great storm to drown the Trojans she hated so much. As he and his sidekick, Achates, go ashore to find help, they come upon Dido's new city. Venus, Aeneas' mother, schemes to help her son by having Dido fall in love with him. She sends her other son, the god Cupid, to impersonate Aeneas' son, Ascanius, and prick Dido with one of his love causing arrows. The queen falls madly in love and can not contain herself. Her mind is fraught with passion, and "in frenzy [she] staggered and reeled through the city"

When Juno perceives what Venus has done, the two goddesses strike a bargain, with the emotions of two mortals as the subjects. Juno will allow Dido to "be slave to a Trojan husband" if Venus will allow that Aeneas will not be ruler of the "new Troy" but instead rule with Dido. Thus, Carthage will become the center of the Mediterranean. To accomplish this end, Juno and Venus conspire to get the two of them alone together in a cave through the subterfuge of a storm during a hunting expedition. The two consummate their relationship, and Aeneas becomes Dido's consort.

However, as is wont to happen, rumours begin to fly. "The queen neglects her duty for her foreign lover', and the like are whispered among the subjects. This news reaches the ears of King Iarbas. Iarbas is semi-divine, the son of Jupiter and a nymph, and has petitioned Dido for marriage before. When he hears that she has taken Aeneas as her consort, he becomes angered and prays to his father to correct this wrong. Jupiter hears his prayers and sends Mercury to command Aeneas to leave the city and fulfill his destiny of founding Rome (or at least its ancestor city.)

Now, up to this point, Aeneas has been doing pretty well. He's fallen in love with a powerful queen, and been set up as a consort. He leads a cushy life, supervising construction by day and sharing Dido's couch by night. I have no problem with Aeneas during this time period. He treats Dido well, it would seem, and he's productive, helping make Carthage a great city. But his actions after Mercury commands him to leave are despicable.

*Cowed by this apparition, terrified Aeneas
Was dumb, his hair stood on end; his tongue clove;
He burned to escape, to leave these lotus-lands;
Thunderstruck with this stark ultimatum
From the god of gods. Oh, God, what can he do?
With what words mollify the queen's fury?*



Aeneas immediately, like the rat that he is, is concerned with how to abate the queen's fury. There is no question in his mind of whether or not he should go. And it would seem that there shouldn't be, because he is being commanded by Jupiter. But mythology gives us many examples of mortals who defy the will of the gods. Admetus, for example, puts off his death not once, but twice in direct opposition to the decree of the gods. (Encyclopedia Mythica) Aeneas does not even fleetingly consider these things. It would not be a betrayal of his piety to entertain a brief dream, would it?

Even worse, he does not go to Dido immediately and explain the situation. Instead, he orders his ships to be prepared; *to be prepared in secret, without the queen's knowledge*. What a horrible choice this, what lack of respect! The queen is a rational person, if Aeneas had gone to her immediately, if he had explained the situation to her—who know how the results might have changed! But instead, he chooses to deceive her. Dido, however, can not be deceived. With the intuition of a lover, she senses that the ships are being prepared and goes to find him.



*You traitor! Did you hope to mask such treachery
And silently slink from my land?! Is there nothing to keep you?
Nothing my life, my love has given you?
Knowing that if you go—I cannot but die?*

Aeneas denies her pleas cruelly. "Do not ever imagine I came as a prospective husband." Yet Juno herself said that she would recognize Aeneas as Dido's husband after the incident in the cave. Thus, Aeneas is Dido's divinely approved husband, a designation which should be supreme to legal obligation. Even now Aeneas could salvage the situation. If he had picked his words more wisely, if he had soothed Dido, perhaps she might have chosen a different plan. But he hardens his heart and coldly tells her he is obligated to do so. He mocks her: "You are a Phoenician and yet you dote on Carthage, can not a Trojan then have his Italy?" And finally, he says, "It is not by my own free will that I leave for Italy."

To be fair to Aeneas, as much as it pains me, he is obligated to obey the commands of the gods by his piety. However, he does not even try to help the queen. In light of Dido's back story, we can see how serious his desertion will be. She is a powerful queen, yet she is also a new queen. She is surrounded by hostile tribes, and her own people have lost faith in her because of her love for Aeneas. If Aeneas stays, the two of them can build up Carthage to greatness. Alone, she can no longer lead her people. Their confidence in her is destroyed. Iarbas is on the point of war in his rage, and there is always the threat of Pygmalion.

Dido chooses the one path open to her: suicide. This choice is directly caused by Aeneas' cruelty. If he had offered her advice, if he had taken her with him, if he had promised to return once his city was founded; all viable options which he does not even consider. Aeneas' piety is only a smokescreen for a man who is afraid to go with what his heart desires. If he had desired to stay in Carthage, Juno, queen of Heaven, would have been on his side. We saw in the Iliad that Juno is capable of changing Jupiter's mind if she puts her mind to it. Perhaps she could have done so here.



We will never know, for Aeneas does not bring any of these options into play. Cowed by the gods, he can not think of any way to get around the situation. He does not sacrifice or pray that their will might be changed. He does not leave troops to help Dido. He simply sails away like a dog, leaving Dido the mess of her kingdom and a sure prescription for a swift death by her own hand.

From Father to Merciless Soldier

In the [Underworld section](#), the shedding of various parts of Aeneas' identity was covered. However, his identity losses began much earlier than the Underworld and continue on beyond it. It was simply the most concentrated occasion.

The first loss occurred, of course, in Troy with the death of Creusa. Although Aeneas carelessly loses her, her loss still resonates and drives him back into the flaming city three times to seek her. However, if he is to fulfill his destiny, he can not be married. He must marry a Latin princess with no personality. So Creusa has to go and a small part of Aeneas goes with her. His first, true love, the mother of his child is gone. In addition, his homeland is gone. Aeneas is now a rootless wanderer with his greatest helpmate ripped from him.



Then, later on, he must give up all pretense at being able to choose his love where he himself might want to find it. This is the moral of his episode with Dido, for she is not the love the gods will allow him to have. For a more in depth discussion, go to the [Abandoning Dido](#) section. Suffice it to say, Aeneas is once again impressed with the order that he can not choose how he will live. And he blindly accepts this.

Another episode worth mentioning is the episode with the Trojan women. Inspired to madness by Juno, they burn some of the Trojan ships when they are ashore at Sicily. The women are weary of sailing, and so Aeneas leaves them behind. With the removal of Trojan females (although one or two seem to stay along for the ride) the possibility of continuing the Trojan race is impossible. Aeneas, being a moron, does not seem to care about this. Now all he holds of Troy is the penates, or his household gods.

Throughout the whole epic, Aeneas has been shown again and again that he must abandon any hope of recreating Troy. He is not allowed to stay with Andromache and Helenus in their "New Pergamus" or to remain behind under the rule of pseudo-Trojan Acestes. He must give up his goal of rebuilding Troy in his new city and look to Rome. When Aeneas loses his father, he also loses a large part of his identity. Anchises was a great seer and interpreter and with his death, Aeneas lost a source of strength. (But he does not even completely give up his role as son until he meets Anchises again in the [Underworld](#).) Now he must seek his own way. And as we have seen, he makes a poor job of it most of the time.

When Aeneas finally lands in Italy, he sends an embassy to Latinus, king of Latium. The king grants the Trojans peace and seeks to engage his daughter Lavinia to Aeneas. However, as was said, Aeneas left behind the part of himself that is a supplicant in the Underworld. His attempts to act as a supplicant are now useless, as Juno sends a fury to goad Latinus' wife, Amata, to stir the rage of Turnus, Lavinia's suitor. He declares war on the Trojans. Even with this clear warning that the way of the supplicant is no longer for him, Aeneas goes to Evander seeking an ally. Evander graciously agrees and gives Aeneas troops. Most importantly, he sends his son Pallas with Aeneas. Now, personally, I wouldn't have trusted Aeneas with my dog, let alone my son, but Evander obviously trusts him. And for his trust, his son is brutally killed. Evander even suspected that this would happen, and still he sent his son. Perhaps Aeneas is not the only stupid man in the Aeneid.

As for the battle itself, Aeneas enjoys it to a degree we have not seen him enjoy war before. Where he once spared even Helen, the most hated enemy of the Trojans, he now can not even spare a son fighting to defend his father. And he gloats at his victories in a way that we have not seen him do before. The key to this new behavior from Aeneas is that he has given up. He has fully accepted the

fate which the gods have foisted upon him and is now fighting not as a person but as the founder of the Roman line. No more is Aeneas a person, but simply a tool. His lust for battle can be seen as a way of taking out his anger at this subversion or simply an extension of the loss of his humanity.

Perhaps the last time we see Aeneas as human is when he mourns the death of Pallas. Here he finally realises that he can no longer plead for help, but must take it by force. Another interpretation, and admittedly a far-fetched one, is that he and Pallas were romantically involved or at least that Aeneas had more than friendly feelings for the youth. His words at the funeral might seem to support this theory, when he speaks of his love for Pallas. Indeed, he even gives him as a shroud clothes made for him by Dido. At the same time as the funeral, he allows the Latins to collect their dead from the battlefield. Here is the old Aeneas we know, a brief glimpse of him before the final perversion.

The final lines of the Aeneid, the final impression of Aeneas that we get is so far removed from the Aeneas that we meet at the beginning that it is nigh impossible to recognize. Gone is the compassionate father, gone is the lover, gone is the son. Gone even is the Trojan, for Juno and Jupiter strike a deal that Aeneas and the Trojans will be assimilated into the Latins, with not a trace of their heritage left. With this last stripped from him, Aeneas has lost everything that makes him the person he is, and he is left simply with his rage, with his weapons. He has become Achilles. The beginning of the Aeneid, "I sing of arms and the man.." should have clued us into this at the beginning. Arms are what are important, not the man who wields them.



"Vergil, I think, has caught a truth in this representation of angry, murderous Aeneas. Killing Turnus is a victory for the cause, but not for Aeneas. In this final struggle... Aeneas can only be the loser. Triumphant he should never be; angry, I feel that I understand him better. It is his final assertion against (enslavement to?) the destiny that has almost dehumanized him, the final proof by Vergil that "pius Aeneas" (pious Aeneas) is not passive, but more tragic than Dido and Turnus together."
(William S. Anderson, *The Art of the Aeneid*, 1969)

When Aeneas kills Turnus, he gives up his identity for good. Although it might have been possible for such a skilled poet as Virgil to restore it to him if he had finished the Aeneid, we must work with what we have of the poem. And in that, we have Aeneas killing a man who has begged for mercy. Much as Achilles denies Hector's pleas when he sees him wearing patroclus' borrowed armor, Aeneas savagely kills Turnus when he sees him wearing Pallas' sword belt. This is the same man who has not killed Greeks(in the person of Achaemenides), who has spared the life of Helen, the most hated enemy of his race. Now, he kills Turnus, with whom he has no such hatred other than that of enemies in war. I personally can not stand by and idly watch Aeneas kill his own identity when he kills Turnus. I am outraged. I am disgusted with what he has allowed himself to become, that he has not struggled to keep his identity.

The reason Aeneas is such a bad man is because he is not allowed to *be* a man. He must be "the founder of the Roman race". And therefore, he can not keep the redeeming characteristics he has at the beginning of the poem . One by one, they are taken from him, until he can only fight and kill.

Aeneas' False(?) Dreams

People have wondered for centuries why Virgil chose to have Aeneas go through the false ivory gate instead of the horn gate of truth. Was Virgil making a slight on the current state of the Roman empire?

Disregarding the outside influence of the author and concentrating solely on the poem and its characters as a fictional reality, there are several ways of interpreting this choice. Anchises is the one who leads Aeneas and the Sibyl to the false gate. Does he know that his son does not truly have these things as his goals? Or does Aeneas simply choose the false gate because he doesn't know any better? To further our theory that Aeneas is a bad man, we shall go with the interpretation that Aeneas left Tartarus by the false gate because he did not truly value the goals that had been set forth for him by the gods as his real goals and dreams.



When Aeneas first enters the underworld, he is ignorant of the specifics of his destiny. He knows that he must found a city in Italy, but not what will become of that city. Aeneas meets three significant people in the underworld, each of which represent some important aspect of himself. The first is Dido. She represents his role as a lover, a role which he seemed to leave behind in Troy with the death of Creusa. But he found love against the odds. However, his destiny can not allow him to feel love, for that love would prevent him from fulfilling his great task. The first aspect of himself that Aeneas must then give up is his role as a lover and husband. He leaves this behind when Dido shuns him, as well she should.

A side note here about Aeneas as a bad man. When he sees the shade of Dido in the underworld, instead of profusely apologizing, he spouts more of his "Fate commanded me" rhetoric. Even if this is true, now is not the time for justification of his actions. Now is the time for grovelling. Even in the Underworld to a hapless shade, he can not say that he is sorry.

The second figure that Aeneas meets is that of Deiphobus. Deiphobus was a fellow Trojan and soldier who was slain horribly at the last battle. He and Aeneas talk for a few hours about what happened to him at Troy, and then Deiphobus pardons Aeneas for not burying his actual corpse and simply wailing over an empty tomb on a faraway island. Deiphobus represents Aeneas' past life as a Trojan and survivor of war. So the next aspect he leaves behind is that of his Trojanhood, but more importantly the aspect of him which is a conquered person. No more can he wander the Mediterranean seeking help.



From now on, that tacit will not work for him. For example, when he sends an embassy to beg Latinus for help, war breaks out as a result. And when he seeks help from Evander, Pallas, Evander's son, is indirectly killed as a result. Although Aeneas does not realise it yet, he has lost a small piece of himself here, a small part of his identity has remained with Deiphobus. The third and final person Aeneas meets in the Underworld is his father, Anchises. Here, Aeneas learns the

specifics of his fates when Anchises points out the souls of the future Romans who are waiting to be born in the Elysian Fields.



Anchises is very keen on Aeneas as the founder of the Roman race. He is most thankful that Aeneas was not sidelined permanently by Dido(grrrrrrr) Anyway, Anchises represents the aspect of Aeneas that is a son. He must leave behind once and for all these familial ties, seek his father's advice for the last time. (You might also notice that Iulus becomes less prominent of a character after this part, and is never mentioned as being with Aeneas in the same way as when he clung to him in Libya again.) Aeneas keeps losing parts of himself, and with his father so eager to have him take on his destined role, he easily loses his son aspect.

So when Aeneas goes up through the gate of false dreams he does so because he is no longer Aeneas. The real Aeneas, let's face it, would have preferred to stay in Troy. Indeed he says as much to Dido. Barring that, I believe he truly wanted to stay with Dido in Libya. Unfortunately he was not brave enough to even attempt to defy the gods. Perhaps it is only the passage of time which makes us look on Aeneas as a bad man. We do not comprehend such piety. But then we have the examples of Odysseus, who defied Poseidon and won. In comparison, Aeneas seems an empty shell of a person.

*"The real subject of the Aeneid is not Aeneas... it is Rome and the glories of her empire, seen as the romanticist sees the great past. The first title given it was *The Deeds of the Roman People*. Aeneas is important because he carries Rome's destiny; he is to be her founder by the high decrees of fate."*(Edith Hamilton, The Roman Way, 1960)

Aeneas easily gives up his aspects in the Underworld, transforming completely into the 'Roman Aeneas' from the 'Trojan Aeneas' No more does he strive for what he as a person wants, but for what he as a cipher for the gods *should* want. Thus he goes through the gate of false dreams, for these dreams are not his true dreams, but the ones he has been told he should have. And this is the crux of why Aeneas is such a moron. He does not adapt himself to his destiny, but instead loses himself to it.

Ignorance is Aeneas

And now for your amusement, I will list a number of times in the Aeneid when Aeneas has no clue what's going on, with a slight explanation of each incident.

- As Aeneas approaches the city of Carthage, or Byrsa, he comes upon a girl in hides, dressed as a hunter. This girl is actually Venus in disguise. Aeneas at first believes she is Diana.

Okay, we have to give him a little credit for knowing she was a goddess, but still, not knowing his own mother? And then, to top it off, he whines about his mother never revealing herself to him in her true form. Duh. Does he remember Semele at all?

- He manages to completely miss out on Dido being in love with him until she seduces him in the cave.

This is kind of ridiculous. The woman is reeling through the streets, fondling his son because he reminds her of his father, and sighing to beat the band. Yet Aeneas pokes along not noticing a thing.

- Hey! Aeneas, along with ALL the Trojans is fooled by the Trojan Horse.

We can't judge him too harshly for this one. Everyone fell for it.

- After Aeneas escapes from the Trojan ruins, he goes ashore on a small island. On that island there is a bush which bleeds when he plucks its branches.

We can forgive him for not knowing the story of the poor youth behind the bush, but really, it's hysterical that it takes him three tries to think, "Huh. Maybe I shouldn't pick on the bush that bleeds."

- When Aeneas leaves Carthage, he looks back and sees the smoke from Dido's suicide pyre. "But looking back towards the city he saw the glow of fire-Poor Dido's funeral fires-but what had caused so great a conflagration he could not tell."

All right, he does not get off lightly here. Aeneas is the only person on board his ship who doesn't get what the fire stands for. "But as they thought of the of the bitter agonies ensuing from the outrage of great love and to what lengths frenzy will drive a woman, the Trojans felt in their hearts the leaden weight of grim foreboding." The whole crew can sense that something is wrong, but Aeneas, who was closest to the situation, is ignorant.

- Aeneas, in the Underworld, is shown his descendants. Each figure is carefully explained to him. But even so, when he later receives a shield with their exploits on them, he cannot recognize a single one of them.

Aeneas is simply a cipher through which the gods pour the fate of Rome. He can not recognize his future achievements because he is not connected as a person to it, merely as a means to its end. Aeneas can not function as a good person because he passively accepts the role that is forced on him, and does not mold it to fit himself.

Losing Creusa

One of the first indications of Aeneas' general stupidity is the fact that he *loses his wife*. His wife. He loses her, as if she were a set of keys. Many would argue that it was a situation of war, that the city was being sieged. However, he managed to keep track of both his son and his father, even going so far as to carry the father on his back.



Could he not have held Creusa as well? Or at the very least, held her hand? He does not seem to value her very highly, for she "follows behind". Is this a safe situation for a woman to be in when a city is being sacked? As everyone knows, the slowest, hanging behind member of a group is the one who is attacked and eaten. And so too is Creusa eaten up by the fire and smoke of the fight.

This is bitter irony, for Creusa was very worried about other people getting out of Troy. When Anchises, Aeneas' father, refuses to leave Troy, she pleads with him eloquently. Also, when Aeneas decides to fight instead of flee, she pleads with him as well:

*If you are going to death, then take us with you.
To all that may befall-from what you have seen
If you have any faith in a further stand,
Then make it here protecting your own house!*



No one seems to look out for Creusa as she looks out for Aeneas and Anchises. In fact, none of the three men keep track of her. When she "fell by the wayside", surely one of them would have seen her? He even admits that he forgot about her:

*"Creusa-she was torn from me-what happened to her?
Did she stop or stray or sink down in exhaustion?
I was never to set my eyes on her again (uh, duh, Aeneas, yes you were. Remember? You see her ghost?)
Never had I looked back when she first flagged
Never gave her a thought..."*

And although Aeneas is upset when he finds her missing, wouldn't have he taken better care of her if he truly valued her? Or maybe he's just a moron. Whichever. Creusa's ghost comes and graciously gives him a reason to feel better for not taking better care of her. She has held back by the great mother goddess. Once more, Aeneas is excused from acting in a wise manner by the excuse that the gods will it otherwise.

Links

[Dido](#)

A multimedia introduction to the legend of the Carthaginian Queen.

[Life of Virgil](#)

Biography of the poet.

[Aeneid images](#)

Illustrations and art inspired by the Aeneid.

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