Leaving Dido demonstrates Aeneas’s heroship by showing his ability to acknowledge his mistakes and that he possesses the determination and compassion to do what is best for Dido.

By leaving Dido behind, Aeneas proved to the Trojans, the world, and the conspiring gods, that there was no obstacle large enough that would undermine his determination to found Rome. Although Aeneas forgets his main mission temporarily, with the help of Mercury, he returns to his divinely given mission. Almost in direct response to Aeneas’s delay, his father in the underworld stresses the importance that the “[Trojans not] hang back” and that they “exert [their] courage,/” and seize Italy while they are able (6.806 Sarah Ruden). In J. W. Mackail’s translation, his father implies that Aeneas staying back with Dido would be cowardly as he would be “[hesitating] to give valour scope in deeds” (6.809 J. W. Mackail). If Aeneas remains faithful to Dido, he would not only be shying away from his duty to establish Rome, but he would also be letting the fear of battle and war impede his unwavering determination to fulfill his calling. However, the expectation of Aeneas to fulfill this mission is not merely his father’s dying wish, but it is also the divine duty that many of the gods wish to see happen. While Aeneas is constructing in Dido’s country, the messenger Mercury comes to visit Aeneas and taunts Aeneas, teasing, “all the coming splendor…is a weight you do not wish to shoulder” (4.272-273). Listening to Mercury, Aeneas returns to his duty, knowing fully well that not only the world and his father are depending on him to carry out the prophecy, but also the divine world, including Venus, Mercury, and Jove. Just as any hero must persevere through all obstacles and remain faithful to their task at hand, Aeneas is able to overcome both the obstacle of Dido and the pain of leaving his love, because his determination for founding Rome is so strong.

In addition to being determined to let go of the past mistakes and return on the right path, Aeneas in leaving Dido also signifies his heroic compassion for Dido, giving Dido what she needs instead of what she wants. Ever since Venus’s plan to prevent Dido from attacking the Trojans went awry, the people’s faith in their queen’s authority wanes. While Dido is busy with hearing Aeneas’s stories of the Trojans’ suffering, she neglects her duties as a leader and lets the city run to ruin, with construction halting, as the “towers she started do not rise” Furthermore, the love Dido has for Aeneas is described more as a “sickness” (4.90) and a “wound” (4.67). With Carthage falling apart, Aeneas makes the right decision for not only Rome but also for the betterment of Carthage. His presence there only made Dido lose favor with the people, with rumors insulting Dido’s recently acquired priority of pleasure over duties, with some exclaiming, “What kind of rulers spend the whole long winter/ Sunk deep in luxury and sordid passion?” (4.193-194). By leaving Carthage, Aeneas gives Dido a chance to redeem herself from her “[devouring] flame” of passion, enabling both him and Dido the chance to return to the duties they are responsible for (4.66). Even though some may argue that Aeneas’s absence hinders more than helps Dido, since his leave ultimately causes Dido’s suicide, Aeneas has no control over Dido’s passions, and as far as he could tell, it was his presence that ruined Dido. If he stays, he would lose the trust and loyalty the people have for Dido, and if he leaves, he risks Dido becoming a threat to her own self due to her obsessive passion. Since he was not sure of the latter like the first option, his act of leaving shows his compassion for her own wellbeing instead of her sickly desires.

Although one might think Aeneas’s departure from Carthage marks shows that Aeneas is fallible and therefore is not a good fit for a hero, his ability to make mistakes and then to handle them actually strengthens the heroic quality of being humble. By choosing to leave Dido, Aeneas is not only returning to his mission, but he is also acknowledging his mistake in delaying his journey to establishing Rome. Following Mercury’s invitation to return to his divine calling, Aeneas recognizes his mistake, with his whole body frustrated at his delay, including his “hair stood up” and he knew that he should flee, “burned to run-however sweet this land was.” (4.280-281). If Aeneas is a perfect leader who is never distracted by his love for Dido and the ease of living in peace in her country, his humility would be in question. However, with the problem of dealing with his mistake, Aeneas is forced to choose between owning up to his mistakes or trying to ignore them and make it appear as if there was no mistake. Aeneas proves his heroship by choosing humility, apologizing to his future son, saying, “I know I cheat my darling son Ascanius/ Of fields fate gave him in his western realm” (4.354-355). Although some may point out that he lacks humility in his decision to try to reason with Dido that he was not actually married to her and was therefore not breaking any commitment, he more than makes up for it by his momentous decision to leave Carthage, and in doing so, acknowledge that he is made a mistake to fall in love with Dido and forget his main mission.

In conclusion, by humbly recognizing his blunder of staying in Carthage, by realizing the affect his presence has on Dido and her kingdom, and by staying true to his life mission, Aeneas, as a humble compassionate and determined hero, makes the right choice in leaving Dido and her kingdom.