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Foundations I

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A Roman Vice called Love

Virgil's *The Aeneid* provides an insight into the psyche of Roman society and the ideals it holds dear. Pietas or obligation to one's duty is the most important of the lot, and *The Aeneid* presents love as its archenemy. Dido's story in the epic illustrates this point discernibly. Here love is ascribed many negative attributes and its pursual results in the fall of a great queen.

Romans view romantic love as a tool for manipulation, and it is seen very clearly in the exchange between Venus and Amor. The following lines stand testimony to Venus's tactics to make Dido sympathetic towards Aeneas:

By guile beforehand, pin her (Dido) down in passion,

So she cannot be changed by any power

But will be kept on my side by profound

Love of Aeneas (28, 1.922-925)

This move is crucial from Venus's point of view to protect Aeneas from the wrath of Juno. Dido is building a "great temple ... in Juno's honor" (19, 1.606), which shows that Juno is highly revered in Carthage. Though Dido has shown compassion towards the plight of Trojans, she is susceptible to Juno's influence. By making Dido fall in love with Aeneas, Venus wants to

eliminate the possibility of Juno's harmful intervention later. To execute her stratagem, Venus uses love to manipulate Dido and make sure that her willingness to help Aeneas does not change under any circumstance. Love is used here for exploiting human emotions, and Juno notices this when she mentions, "... by collusion of two gods one mortal / Woman is brought low" (99, 4.135-136). Juno's observation suggests that Gods are familiar with such expedients and recognize when they see one. This episode brings a sharp focus on love's manipulative use for nefarious ends.

The negative connotation associated with romantic love was so powerful that Romans saw it as a moral weakness. After the death of her husband, Sychaeus, Dido has resolved to lead a chaste life and not remarry. Romans interpret this way of life for a widow as abiding by a high moral code. Seeing herself falling for Aeneas, she mentions her feelings towards him as a "frailty" (96, 4.27) and prefers death over it. Dido's dialogue with her sister shows herself fighting back the debauchery of entertaining romantic thoughts when she prays, "But O chaste life, before I break your laws, / I pray Earth may open, gape for me / Down to its depth" (96, 4.33-35). Dido's loss of self-esteem later in the story is very much tied to this guilt of behaving immorally by failing in love with Aeneas and not honoring her promise "to the ashes of Sychaeus" (116, 4.767). The epic makes it clear that by giving in to passion, Dido loses her chance to lead an innocent, ascetic life free from the corrupting influence of love.

In various instances, Virgil equates love to a sort of illness. Explaining the condition of Dido, Virgil writes, "The inward fire eats the soft marrow away, / And the internal wound bleeds on in silence" (97, 4.93-94). This depiction of romantic love is of the worst of ailments a human can have. Comparing it to a bleeding wound, Virgil points out how the yearning for love slowly drains a person's morality and wisdom. Similarly, the analogy with fire shows how it consumes a

person's soul like a deadly fever and renders him/her dysfunctional. A person infected by love goes through bouts of anxiety and unease, and this condition is often incurable as indicated by the following lines: “And desire for him gave her no rest. / ... this queen, far gone and ill”. A condition of such agony and pain is nothing short of a debilitating mental disorder. It would not be incorrect to deduce that due to such effects of love, similar to an illness, Romans view it as a prime antagonist to their central value of life.

Even with the aforementioned dim outlook, the biggest point of contention for Romans against love was its direct negative influence on the value they hold supreme, i.e., pietas. Pietas is an individual's conscientious devotion to the obligations placed on him by society or gods. A person in the clutches of love forgets his duties and shirks responsibilities, which is the greatest sin he can commit. Before Dido fell in love with Aeneas, she was a great leader who built her city into a shining beacon of civilization. She performed her role as a queen very well and was committed to her duties. However, this soon takes a turn for the worst once she is head-over-heels fallen for Aeneas. Her obsession with Aeneas leads to complete neglect of state-affairs. This results in the abandonment of various projects, and development of the city comes to a standstill:

Towers, half-built, rose

No further; men no longer trained in arms

Or toiled to make harbors and battlements

Impregnable. Projects were broken off (98, 4.121-124)

Irresponsibility and dereliction are on full display in Dido's actions, and such behavior is deplorable in Roman society. In fact, by Dido's story, it is cautioned to the roman public not to neglect their duties towards the republic/empire by falling prey to the 'illness' of love.

The Roman warning against the pursual of romantic interests is further explained by Dido's downfall brought about by the loss of pride and prestige. The rumor mill goes ablaze with the news of her affair with Aeneas. People in her kingdom start talking about "how they reveled all the winter long / Unmindful of the realm, prisoners of lust" (102, 4.264-265). This is a mark of great shame, especially for a ruler who was once revered and described as "The tallest, taller by a head than any" (21, 4.683). *Diffamere* and gossip about their monarch is the lowest low in Roman society through which he loses his respect and standing. The cost of Aeneas's love is painfully captured in her own words when she tells him, "my own Tyrians are hostile; / Because of you, I lost my integrity / And that admired name" (107, 4.439-441). The erosion of her self-esteem is so deep that even after this realization of ignominy, she begs Aeneas not to leave her, "humbling her pride before her love" (110, 4.575). Her stature, her position in society, nothing matters to her anymore, and she falls into disrepute.

The Aeneid concludes Dido's story arc by depicting death as the final destination of a crazed lover. The rejection of her love leads to an apparent loss of senses, and in the end, grief takes her over. The only way she can see out of this misery is by taking her own life. The depth of her despair is captured accurately in the following lines: "A suicide in these unheard-of-rites; / She failed to see how great her madness was / And feared no consequence more grave" (114, 4.692-694). The sorrow resulting from Aeneas's desertion of Dido has metamorphized her from a once-great queen who "built a famous town" and "avenged (her) husband" (120, 4.910-911) to a suicidal maniac. In her broken mental state, she considers death to be her only refuge to escape

the pain brought about by Aeneas's leaving. Her sister's lament on Dido's death, "You have put to death / Yourself and me, the people and the fathers / Bred in Sidon, and your own new city" (121, 4.943-945), is a testimony to the fact that love can make a person do the most unimaginable of things. Dido shows a complete disregard for her sister and subjects by taking the extreme step of committing suicide. By doing so, she abandons her own people and hence her responsibility towards them. By depicting this behavior, *The Aeneid* portrays love as a harbinger of literal and metaphorical death to the person and society, respectively. One cannot help but notice that in the description of Dido's final fate, Virgil is trying to say that the only thing a passionate love like this can bring is a horrible death.

Dido's chapter in the epic serves as an admonishing example of what happens to an individual when he forsakes his duty to pursue the evil of passionate-lustful love. By comparing love to an illness resulting in moral degradation and loss of dignity, *The Aeneid* elucidates its ill-effects. Finally, by presenting death as a final offering of love, the epic provides a powerful deterrent to anyone harboring romantic inclinations. In conclusion, *The Aeneid* gives remarkable insight into the Roman attitude towards love and how it is detrimental to an individual.