

**Let's Think About This Reasonably: The Conflict of Passion and Reason in Virgil's  
*The Aeneid***

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It has long been a philosophical debate as to which is more important in human nature: the ability to feel or the ability to reason. Both functions are integral in our composition as balanced beings, but throughout history, some cultures have invested more importance in one than the other. Ancient Rome, being heavily influenced by stoicism, is probably the earliest example of a society based fundamentally on reason. Its most esteemed leaders and statesmen such as Cicero and Marcus Aurelius are widely praised today for their acumen in affairs of state and personal ethics which has survived as part of the classical canon. But when mentioning the classical canon, and the argument that reason is essential to civilization, a reader need not look further than Virgil's *The Aeneid* for a more relevant text. *The Aeneid*'s protagonist, Aeneas, is a pious man who relies on reason instead of passion to see him through adversities and whose actions are foiled by a cast of overly passionate characters. Personages such as Dido and Juno are both portrayed as emotionally-laden characters whose will is undermined by their more rational counterparts. Also, reason's importance is expressed in a different way in Book VI when Aeneas's father explains the role reason will play in the future Roman Empire. Because *The Aeneid*'s antagonists are capricious individuals who either die or never find contentment, the text very clearly shows the necessity of reason as a human trait for survival and as a means to discover lasting happiness.

The bluntest expression of how passion can be detrimental to an individual is shown in Book IV with Queen Dido's reaction to her abandonment by Aeneas. Queen Dido's tragic end is precipitated by the torrid love she feels for a man who is ruled by destiny. Virgil makes it obvious from the open of the book that what Dido has allowed to happen to herself is unsafe as when the narrator says, "The queen, for her part, all that evening ached / With longing that her heart's blood fed, a wound / Or inward fire eating her away" (IV.1-3). The language and imagery reinforce the feeling of danger involved in being devoured by longing; for instance, in the second line the excerpt refers to Dido's love as a wound, and the third line depicts her being consumed by fire, an elemental force generally associated with destruction. Virgil, aside from detailing the personal destruction that accompanies unbridled love, also alludes to the crumbling of society that can originate from the imprudence of its leaders. Because Dido is so enamored by Aeneas, several of her state's projects are postponed or neglected (IV.121-126). At this point in the book, Virgil shows how heated love can cause a confusion of priorities, which causes Dido to care more about her personal life than the welfare of her people and ultimately distinguishes her leadership from Aeneas's. Dido's passion proves too strong for her to control when Aeneas breaks off the relationship; after haranguing him for his decision to leave (IV.417-454), she has her sister plead with him to stay (IV.605-6); however, neither attempt works. When Dido realizes all her options have evaporated, she "caught / Her fatal madness and resolved to die" (IV.656-7). Here is Virgil's most poignant petition against the hazards of losing oneself to lust; not only does Dido kill herself and bereave her sister, but she also bereaves her nation. Dido's suicide is meant to illustrate to the audience how much is lost in giving oneself to selfish hedonism. Had Dido not killed herself, Carthage might have become a great power, and Dido very well might have met a

greater lover than Aeneas. Because her actions are passion-based instead of reason-based, she succumbs to a tragic end.

In Book V, the folly of passion is again shown, but Virgil expertly transforms it into an opportunity to show the restorative properties of reason, enabling the book to serve a dual purpose. The book begins with Aeneas and his men playing games and later presents the women's requiem from Anchises near the ships. Sent by meddling Juno, the minor goddess Iris swoops down to incite a riot. She stirs up pandemonium among women, and when Pyrgo identifies her as a goddess instead of a mortal, she departs. The women, "Wrought to a frenzy, all cried out together" (V.853). They ignore the reasoning of wise Pyrgo, gather burning sticks, and begin setting the ships aflame. Even though the women are encouraged by Iris to behave so irrationally, they allow themselves to be absorbed in the fervor. The ships are nearly destroyed, but god-fearing Aeneas prays to Jove to either save the ships or smite him (V.890-99). Jove sends rain to extinguish the fires, but one ship is already destroyed. A rational character named Nautēs suggests to Aeneas they take advantage of the misfortune and leave the old and feeble that cannot be brought along to Italy on the island to start their own colony, thereby eliminating the threat posed by the infirm towards Aeneas's mission of establishing Rome (V.918-33). In this book, an act of passion leads to an act of reason, which illustrates perfectly Virgil's emphasis on the negative side effects of passion and the positive chief effects of reason. The women giving into unreasoned rampaging cause almost devastating consequences to Aeneas's destiny and the founding of Rome. Nautēs's response, however, shows practicality amidst almost total catastrophe.

Book VI is probably the most long-reaching statement of reason in respect to consequence and scope throughout the first six books. Aeneas is plunged into the Underworld to

meet with his father. His father shows him the files of Aeneas's posterity who will later be born to rule over Rome. After Anchises shows him most of his future lines, he utters to Aeneas what could be described as Rome's credo:

Roman, remember by your strength

Earth's peoples—for your arts are to be these:

To pacify, to impose the rule of law,

To spare the conquered, battle down the proud. (VI.1151-4)

What makes this quote key is how it tells Aeneas to rule his people. Anchises tells his son he is to rule Earth's peoples, but to do so in a way that adheres to reason instead of passion; to pacify and impose rules of law would entail being fair and impartial instead of flippant and basing judgments off of one's feelings. To spare the conquered and battle down the proud suggests a ruler must not use unnecessary force to defeat a people who have already been defeated and to administer justice to said people. This quote echoes with Rome's foreign policy at the time and political environment in which it was written. Rome had more provinces than it did actual Roman land. It allowed local autonomy to the peoples it conquered, to which historians attribute the success and longevity of the Roman Empire.

*The Aeneid* could accurately be considered a sort of ethical primer for the people of Rome, a fictional case study of the cause and effects of passion as compared to reason. By giving contrasting examples of foolish passion—such as Dido and the Dardan women—and saving and sustaining reason—as in the cases of Nautēs and Anchises's sage advice—Virgil shows his readership the importance of valuing logical thought over unmitigated emotions. Reason is essential in the control of passion, and by controlling his passion, Aeneas is able to establish a civilization that will one day become one of the most powerful and widespread ever to exist on

earth. If the instances presented in the epic are not enough to convince one of Virgil's argument, the reader may allow the evidence of history's greatest and longest sustaining civilization to add weight to his contention.

#### Works Cited

Virgil. *The Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage Classics, 1983.