

Dido and Camilla

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Two women who have to die for Vergil's epic to "justify the ways of Rome to man": Dido, the emotional Carthaginian; Camilla, the fierce Amazon. Today's lecture will examine their roles in the epic.

Dido: the prototype of the women who dies for love. But let's look a little more closely.

Carthage is an objectification of Dido: when she starts up with Aeneas, the towers of the city stop being built and the fortifications of the harbor stop (4.120ff).

Dido's political situation in N. Africa. After the death of her husband she's promised never to remarry and has declined offers from other rulers. Thus when she pledges to Aeneas it's a political decision with political implications. She's pissed off the other rulers and so Aeneas' leaving is not just a personal blow but also leaves her in an untenable political situation (4.438-42; 740ff). Thus her suicide can be seen from outside as rational Stoic choice.

The Stoics wanted to "live according to nature." Similar to Aristotle, they found the human good to be fulfilling the natural human capacity to develop self-direction. Now, what's important here is to know what one can control: to what extent can I truly be self-directed? We have to beware of staking any importance on external goods: economic success, political power, even health. What we do have under our control, no matter the chaos around us, is our character and our attitude: we can control how we react to things we cannot control. (You can see here the appeal of Stoic practical philosophy to those living in chaotic times.)

Now the Stoics did recognize that some situations are better and preferable to others. They called external events "indifferents," because they make no difference to your happiness, which depends on your reaction to events. Nonetheless, some indifferents can be preferred to others, as contributing to a well-rounded life. However, strictly speaking, the virtuous, self-directed person can be happy in any type of circumstance.

The Stoics had a sense of political duty. For them, human plurality, in family, friendship and political community, was part of human nature, and taking part in governing a stable community was a duty. Again, this duty is undertaken not to be happy, for that can happen even in a badly-run community, but because given the chance to influence things, it is better to have a good community than not. Political peace is a "preferred indifferent." And, since the Stoics were members of the community, they could appreciate that others would not like to live poorly either, so that their sympathy would allow them to act on behalf of others, to prevent them from suffering the loss of their preferred indifferents.

Now the Stoic view of life sometimes led them to suicide. The idea was this: as self-directed, I am happy and fulfilled. Happiness or flourishing then is a certain intensity of activity. Additional life, in the sense of merely adding on years, would not add to the intensity of my activity: I can be no more self-directed than I am at any one moment of true self-direction. (Take the example of temperature: my health is best at 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. At the moment that this is my temperature, I am healthy. I cannot add or subtract degrees and remain healthy, and additional days can never be any more healthy than this one.) Thus, suicide was an alternative when continued life would pile up "bad indifferents": imprisonment, torture, disgrace, and so on.

But Vergil does not allow this interpretation of Dido's suicide. His omniscient narrator offers a physiological analysis of Dido's love madness as "burning fever" and so forth (e.g., 4.3). Compare the positive spin given the libidinal analysis of Aeneas' body as pulled by "duty." Jove complains that A. is not "aroused" by thought of founding Rome while he's involved with Dido (4.317). After scolding by Mercury though A "burns to be gone" (4.385). Rome is his turn-on now ("there is my love"; 4.478). The masculine hard body able to leave any one

particular woman behind (“there are other fields for him to plow” to quote Creon; A is able to “fight down the emotion in his heart” [4.457]) in the name of duty is also a libidinal body, one turned on the thought of community building, duty, and the legacy of his son. In the end, A has become hard and fast, unmovable, like a tree (4.610); but this tumescence is a self-erection for glory and Rome, not for Dido or any other mere woman.

The woman who had brought A so close to forgetting his duty, who had put herself forward as another libidinal focus for A, must die and die badly. Thus the ugly thanatographic glee of the narrator’s description of Dido’s death (4.950ff). None of the honorable warrior death for her: no “beautiful corpse.”

By contrast, Camilla the Amazon queen will die a dignified warrior death, but only after being finally marked as feminine. Now there’s no doubt that Vergil deeply loves Camilla. The outrageous details of her early life present an unforgettable image: fleeing the civil war, C and her dad come to the raging flood, a flood that wipes away the civilizing codes that had begun their feminizing work (11.745). Tied to a spear, becoming the spear itself, she flies over the water accompanied by her father’s desperate prayer dedicating her life to Diana should she survive. Upon landing in the wilderness she is raised with a warrior’s upbringing: killing swans with stones and so forth (11.790). An Amazon queen, she is treated as a great warrior, complete with boasts, catalogues of victims and so on (11. 902ff). But Vergil has painted himself into a corner: she’s a great warrior, but she’s also a woman who opposes Aeneas. How should she die? A real false note is hit when she is caught by her killer while stripping a corpse for trophies. This is a typical warrior act; the Iliad is full of guys getting in trouble by stripping corpses. But Camilla is said to be drawn “by a girl’s love of finery” (11.1066)!

Gender and War: the Amazons. Contrary to popular belief, the spear is not a phallic symbol, or at least not directly. Rather, the penis is a spear symbol. The penis can only symbolize power in a society in which men control the spears. Thus the penis symbolizes power within the family only to the extent that the father/husband/master’s power is backed up by the co-operation of fellow male citizens. Patriarchy and slavery are SOCIAL systems that are EXPERIENCED AS FAMILIAL. Thus it’s only by double mediation that the spear is a phallic symbol: the primary power symbol is the spear, which only in patriarchal societies is symbolized within families as the penis. But with an apolitical familial orientation (most psychoanalysis) the penis is seen as primary and the spear as secondary, as a phallic symbol.

Thus the Amazons are a patriarchal nightmare: women with spears. (Compare Eddie Murphy’s character in “48 Hours” about “America’s worst nightmare”: “N*** with a gun.” But this is not true: America’s worst nightmare is politicized black armed power: there are more guns in the ‘hood now than in the 60s, but the Black Panthers were much more a threat to the system. In other words, the goal of the “criminal justice system” is not to eliminate crime, but to regulate crime in socially acceptable ways: predictable, de-politicized and de-politicizing, profitable for the prison-industrial complex, able to be used in election sound-bites, and so on.)

Back to the Amazons: why did they have to be virgins (11.796), or at best uninterested in sex pleasure and using boys only as sperm injectors for breeding purposes? Because if the penis is a spear symbol, then getting f***ed is getting stabbed: penetration is for losers. Camilla has become a spear; she could never be a field to be plowed.