

Women, Pietas, and the Economy of Sacrifice

Female Disposability in Vergil's *Aeneid*

By Sana Abbas

Many readers tend to treat the *Aeneid* as a poem that upholds the value of *pietas* – the Roman ideal of loyalty to the gods and the state – as one of its guiding principles. At the poem's start, Aeneas appears to embody this ideal, consistently letting duty outweigh his own wishes and relationships. However, Vergil complicates this ideal. Every time Aeneas chooses duty, a private relationship is damaged or destroyed, with most of the losses falling on women. Instead of showing *pietas* simply as a moral good, Vergil reveals how frequently it conflicts with human emotion, especially with the needs, attachments, and grief of the women in the *Aeneid*.

Although the epic follows Aeneas' journey towards the founding of Rome, the poem repeatedly shows that this great progress comes at a personal cost. He loses his wife Creusa at the fall of Troy, destroys Dido's life when he chooses to leave Carthage, and remains emotionally distanced from figures like Andromache. Later, the events of books 9 and 12 show how women such as Euryalus' mother, Amata, and Camilla become casualties of the war that Aeneas' mission sets in motion. Even figures like Lavinia, who do not speak, also contribute to this pattern through their silence and the expectations placed on

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them. Together, these women fall into parallel groups: wives who are abandoned or erased, mothers whose grief interrupts the poem's forward movement, and women like Amata whose emotional intensity grows out of motherly fear. All of their experiences form a kind of counter-narrative inside of the epic. It tells a story about what Rome's future demands from those who are not allowed to shape it.

Several scholars help clarify how these moments with women function throughout the poem. Christine Perkell shows that Aeneas' movement forward towards his destiny is almost always paired with some kind of personal loss, which makes emotional suffering part of the epic's structure rather than merely an accident of the plot. Susan Wiltshire concentrates on mothers and maternal figures, demonstrating how the scenes of grieving women help expose the private cost of war and displacement. Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy adds another angle by examining the poem's attempts at emotional substitution, a framework that reveals itself when women disrupt the destiny of the hero and, therefore, the narrative as a whole. Their work suggests that the hardship experienced by women is not just a background detail but a central part of how the *Aeneid* thinks about duty and the price of fulfilling it.

Across the poem, an "economy of sacrifice" takes shape, one where women, whether as wives or mothers, end up carrying the emotional weight created by Aeneas' sense of duty. It is all of their losses that enable Aeneas to keep moving towards his destiny, yet those same losses reveal a much darker side of the virtue of *pietas* that he is meant to embody. As Aeneas pushed his personal attachments aside in order to fulfill his public role as a leader, he grows increasingly emotionally closed off. This mental progression eventually culminates in his violent killing of Turnus at the end of the poem. Vergil

choosing to focus on the women who remain on the edges of Aeneas' journey suggests that the beginning of Rome relies not only on the heroic accomplishments of men but also on the quieter, and often overlooked, suffering of people who are left out of its grand future.

SECTION 1: WIVES AS THE SILENCED PARTNERS

In the *Aeneid*, the first women the poem asks the reader to pay attention to are the ones who are closest to Aeneas: his wife Creusa and his potential wife Dido. These relationships should have given Aeneas the strongest emotional connections in the epic, but Vergil shows the opposite. Wives or would-be wives are the women the poem removes the fastest, along with immense emotional cost. Their stories show how marriage—or even the possibility of marriage—does not fit into the version of *pietas* that Aeneas is expected to follow as a hero.

Creusa's disappearance during the fall of Troy is the first major example of how wives become silenced or erased as Aeneas moves towards his destiny. When he realizes she is gone, Aeneas reacts with genuine panic and grief. Vergil presents the moment to the readers through Aeneas' perspective with lines that emphasize his shock and confusion. In the chaos, Aeneas suddenly realizes that Creusa is no longer behind him, having been snatched away by fate “heu misero coniunx fatone erepta Creusa substitit” (2.738–39). Aeneas claims he does not know whether she stopped, strayed away from the path, or slipped and sat down “erravitne via seu lapsa resedit, incertum” (2.739–40). The key detail being that Aeneas has no idea how she was lost and was never restored to his sight again “nec post oculis est reddita nostris” (2.740). Later, when he reaches the sacred place of Ceres and finally gathers the survivors, he discovers that she alone is missing, having

escaped the notice of her friends, son, and husband “*demum collectis omnibus una defuit, et comites natumque virumque fefellit*” (2.743–44). The verb *fefellit* is especially striking. It typically carries the sense of something slipping past notice and can be used to refer to deception. Here, Creusa has not deceived anyone literally, but the word makes her disappearance feel like a kind of unnoticed failure that was built into the escape itself; and that somehow, all three of them – friends, child, and husband – allowed her to vanish. Aeneas’ response, “*quem non incusavi amens hominumque deorumque,*” shows Aeneas lashing out in blame at both humans and gods. The adjective *amens* appears elsewhere in the poem for characters who are overwhelmed by emotion, including Dido later in book 4. It is extremely powerful that it was used here because it briefly places Aeneas in the same emotional register as the women whose suffering he will later move past. Taken together, these words portray a husband who is genuinely shattered, not someone who calmly accepts his wife’s death as “necessary” for his growth, but the narrative still pushes him forward. Creusa’s absence becomes one more loss that the story absorbs into the larger pattern of Aeneas’ duty, even though his language makes it clear how violently that loss hits him.

Creusa’s portrayal in the *Aeneid* is brief in comparison to its treatment of Dido, who becomes the poem’s most full demonstration of when the commitment to *pietas* starts demanding the abandonment of human intimacy and connection. In book 4, Aeneas fully inhabits life in Carthage with Dido as his partner. Their union in the cave, however ambiguous, is treated by Dido as nothing less than a marriage, and it seems that Aeneas himself also slips into the rhythms of a husband, overseeing the building of the city, and most

importantly, allowing himself a period of emotional respite after everything he has been through. But this intimacy miraculously disappears in a matter of moments when Mercury descends carrying Jupiter's command. After Aeneas is suddenly called back to duty by feelings of not only resurrected *pietas* but also small amounts of fear and confusion, Aeneas approaches Dido not as the man who lived beside her, but as a stranger lacking in affection. As Perkell mentions, Aeneas "declines to make a statement of care or sympathy although he feels it to be necessary."¹

When Dido confronts Aeneas, Vergil lets her choice of language expose everything he refuses to say. The situation is only fueled by the fact that Dido senses his departure before he admits it: "At regina dolos (quis fallere possit amantem?) praesensit" (But Dido sensed the trick [who can deceive a lover?]) (4.296–297). Dido's rage is presented as a simile comparing her to a "Maenad roused by shaken rattles" "saevit inops animi... bacchatur / qualis commotis excita sacris Thyias" (4.300–301). Although this imagery is an accusation of hysteria and *impietas* it can also be considered a poetic rendering of what it feels like to be betrayed in silence. Dido's seemingly hysteric behavior can be attributed to the fact that she had been left alone with her fear and uncertainty, for both her city being attacked as well as her dismantled reputation in the eyes of her people, all as a result of Aeneas.

The imbalance between Aeneas and Dido becomes clear when she confronts him by gathering every bond she believes they share: "nec te noster amor nec te data dextera quondam / nec moritura tenet crudely funere Dido?" (Our love does not hold you back, nor the pledge you made me, nor the painful death I'll die?) (4.307–308). Aeneas' response is defined by an

¹ Perkell, "On Creusa," 213.

emotional narrowing that contrasts sharply with the fullness of the extent of Dido's intense appeal. He begins by denying the relationship itself and making it appear as something that was blown out of proportion by Dido by saying, "nec coniugis umquam / praetendi taedas aut haec in foedera veni" (I never held out the torches of marriage nor did I enter into such an agreement) (4.338-339).

Although in these verses, Aeneas's obedience to destiny and *pietas* is the defining factor, it is impossible to turn a blind eye towards his apparent emotional turmoil. Perkell is correct that Aeneas withholds his emotions towards her; however, Aeneas does express something comparable to muted sympathy. Although he does play a more active role by choosing to abandon Dido directly, in contrast to Creusa where her abandonment was not entirely his doing, the poem exposes the fact that there is a strain beneath his composure and that he is pressing his cares beneath his heart "curam sub corde premebat" (4.332). And when he admits, "demenisse pigebit Elissae / dum spiritus hos regit artus" (Never will it displease me to remember Elissa, while I am mindful of myself, while a spirit rules these limbs) (4.335-336), it is evident that his words acknowledge an emotional truth that his actions refuse to. Yet, none of this ends up changing the overall outcome. Aeneas' mission requires him to speak in a way that reduces Dido's role, narrowing her voice until the threat of her influencing him and, therefore, the shape of the narrative, is removed. Dido becomes another figure whose emotions are pushed to the margins due to their incompatibility with Aeneas' destiny.

As the poem moves into its second half, Lavinia appears as the figure who embodies the version of womanhood the epic ultimately supports. Vergil conveys her character not through her speech but through the sudden rush of color that spreads

across her face as a reaction to the events happening around her: “flagris perfuse genas, cui plurimus ignem subiecit robor et calefacta per ora cucurrit” (having been dyed in her burning cheeks for whom a very deep blush injected fire and runs through her heated cheeks) (12.65-66). The powerful simile that compares her blushing face to ivory stained with crimson dye or to a white lily when mixed with a field of red roses, “Indum sanguineo veluti violaverit ostro / si quis ebur, aut mixta rubent ubi lillia multa / alba rosa” (12.67-69), portrays her with an artistic delicateness, turning her emotional response into an unpreventable visual image rather than a purposefully voiced opinion. Even the moment Turnus turns to look at her, his attention is focused on her expressions rather than expecting her to speak: “illum turbat amor figitque in virgine vultus” (He is disturbed by love and fixes his face upon the maiden) (12.70).

Lavinia comes across very differently from Creusa and Dido, whose voices and emotions interrupt Aeneas’ momentum, and the story rewards Lavinia’s silence and willingness to conform by allowing her to be part of Aeneas’ grand future. Lavinia pushes back on what many scholars emphasize, because her quiet nature ends up serving as a kind of security. She appears in the poem with no spoken lines, but even so, the plot ends up bending around her and the marriage she represents. Her silence isn’t just the absence of a voice that is treated as an erasure, but instead, it fits neatly into the political world of the epic, where the safest and most ideal kind of partner made specifically for a hero shaped by *pietas* is someone who does not challenge him and can be folded into the future he’s meant to build. When Lavinia is examined next to Creusa’s disappearance and Dido’s tragedy, the contrast makes it hard to miss which kind of woman the poem decides has a place in Aeneas’s world, serving as yet another proof that

ideologically, the future *imperium* of Rome is most compatible with silent wives.

SECTION 2: MOTHERS AS THE MORAL CONSCIENCE OF THE *AENEID*

Andromache's reappearance in book 3 is one of the poem's clearest reminders of the effects the Fall of Troy has had on the women who survived it. Vergil introduces her through the physical shock she experiences upon seeing Aeneas. When she recognizes him, she freezes: "*magnis extrerrita monstis / deriguit visu in medio, calor ossa reliquit*" (she is terrified by the great omen / she froze in the middle of her viewing, heat left her bones) (3.307-308). Her reaction portrays her as a woman still living inside the trauma of Troy's fall, or as Wiltshire describes: "a past that is no longer."² As noted by Wiltshire, when Andromache tries to speak, her first instinct is not to greet Aeneas but to search through the past: "*Verane te facies, verus mihi nuntius adfers, nate dea? Vivisne? Aut, si lux alma recessit, Hector ubi est?*" (Do you as a messenger come to me as a true face, son of a goddess? Do you live? Or if nourishing light has departed, where is Hector?) (3.310-312). She imagines the kind of life she wishes she had reached instead, one that slipped away before she ever had the chance to live it. The rawness of her opening questions makes clear that Hector remains the center of her emotional world long after she had remarried and Troy's physical ruins had been left behind.

As she regains her voice, Aeneas greets her as "Hectoris Andromache" (Andromache of Hector) (*Aen.* 3.319). This choice

² Wiltshire, *Public and Private*, 47.

shows that, even to Aeneas, Andromache's identity remains inseparable from her marriage with Hector. Wiltshire also notes that Andromache and Dido are linked together by their grief for the possibility of children they will never raise and by the way both of them attach themselves to Ascanius as a substitute for what has been lost.³ Furthermore, Vergil places Andromache's emotional intensity as a contrast to Aeneas' restrained composure, underscoring how necessary it is for him to distance himself from the past that clearly still defines her. The scene makes Andromache into one of the poem's moral touchstones, exposing the pain that Aeneas must acknowledge but cannot allow himself to take part in if he is to continue towards his future.

Euryalus' mother unexpectedly interrupts the epic at a point when everything around her is already coming undone, and her reaction feels less like a crafted scene as it invokes the heartbreak of a woman being yanked out of her ordinary life without warning. What makes Euryalus' mother's entry into the narrative even more striking is how it catches readers off guard, as they are unlikely to anticipate such a drastic transition from the battlefield to a domestic space, where a mother's anguish completely takes over. Vergil depicts Euryalus' mother in motion. She is weaving, trying to keep her hands busy in the way mothers do when they desire an outlet for their worry. The news of Euryalus' death hits with such a great force that the rhythm of her work collapses: "at subitus miserae calor ossa reliquit / excussi manibus radii revolutaque pensa" (At once warmth left her bones, poor thing. The shuttle tumbled from her hands, its wool unwinding) (9.475-476). Her body simply stops obeying her and her grief spills outwards in a kind of frantic rush: "veste tegens tibi quam noctes festina

³ Wiltshire, *Public and Private*, 47.

diesque / urgebam, et tela curas solebar anilis" (nor warm you with the robe I'd woven day and night, racing time, the shuttle soothing my old years) (9.489-490). Through these verses, Vergil is showing how Euryalus' mother is clinging to the smallest, most domestic thing she can still hold onto that reminds her of her son. The battlefield has taken Euryalus and continues to hurt her further by unraveling the one act of care she has left.

Andrew Carstairs-McCarthy interprets the namelessness of Euryalus' mother as part of an emotional substitution, referencing Ascanius' promise that if Euryalus were to die, his mother would lack only the name of his own mother, and would, in some sense, step into that role for him.⁴ This idea is insightful and holds value, but it doesn't quite match the force of the scene readers actually witness. Nothing about Euryalus' mother feels interchangeable. Her grief makes her noticeable to the point where the poem cannot possibly flatten her character into a familiar mold. When Euryalus' mother runs out into the open and fills the air with her laments, the Trojans around her begin to falter, causing the battle line to lose its focus for a moment. That disruption really stands out, not only because there is no other comparable character that was able to cause such an interference, but also because it shows that the human cost of war does not simply step aside for destiny. This serves in contrast to Andromache, who has learned over the years how to hold her sorrow quietly and keep living; Euryalus' mother erupts with no preparation at all, and by doing so, she pushes the epic off balance. Her voice does not comply with the poem's vision of noble suffering or orderly loss but instead it ends up seeping into the space where the narrative had been trying to move forward. And in an epic that ultimately rewards

⁴ Carstairs-McCarthy, "Dido, Pallas, Nisus," 201.

the women who are silent, supportive, or at least structurally useful, the outward display of grief by Euryalus' mother stands as something the poem cannot fully absorb: a reminder that the narrative's moral center rests with its mothers, whose perspectives often remain unheard, and whose grief conveys the truths the future empire would rather ignore.

Although it is easy to place Amata into the "irrational woman" cliché, her actions make far more sense when interpreted as maternal protectiveness at a time when her family is faced with political pressures. Like Dido, she too, becomes caught in the middle between personal loyalty and the inevitable political destiny that follows Aeneas wherever he goes, but Amata's grief stems from a different place. She is fighting not for her own happiness but for Lavinia's. When Latinus begins to lean towards the proposal that Lavinia should marry Aeneas, Amata's fear increases rapidly: "exsulibusne datur ducenda Lavinia Teucris / o genitor, nec te miseret nataeque tuique?" (Will you give Lavinia to these Trojan exiles? Don't you pity her, or yourself, her father? Or me?) (7.359-360). Her resistance is not irrational in the slightest: it stems from the genuine concern that Lavinia's marriage is no longer hers to shape. Even though her behavior later spirals under Allecto's influence, that frenzy grows from the same place as her earlier rejected pleas, and it should not overshadow the fact that her first instincts were a clear and grounded concern for her daughter. Amata's words reveal her maternal instincts as she fights to hold onto her daughter in a world that is becoming violent and unfamiliar upon the arrival of Aeneas. Something to take away from this struggle is that Amata becomes one of the poem's clearest reminders that a mother's anger can serve as one of the last honest reactions left in a world where politics swallow everything else.

One of the main purposes of the *Aeneid* is to trace the beginnings of Rome through the steady progress of Aeneas' movement towards his duty, but the story the epic tells is held together just as much by the women who carry the burden of the emotional cost of that journey. Creusa's disappearance, Dido's abandonment, Lavinia's quiet compliance, Euryalus' mother's sudden cry of despair, and Amata's failed attempt to protect her daughter all mark the places where the poem allows their suffering to be felt. Vergil could have easily chosen to exclude these women or reduce their characters to serve as decorative shadows at the edge of the narrative, but instead, he provides them with just enough presence for their suffering to linger with the readers, even though they appear in passing or from the margins. Rome's rise does not come from Aeneas alone. It advances also because wives and mothers take on the wounds his destiny leave behind as it progresses. The losses of these women steady the moral center of the epic even when the narrative tries to press past them. In that sense, the *Aeneid* forms an "economy of sacrifice" in which female disposability becomes the unspoken cost of living up to the value of *pietas*.

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