

Virgil Uncovered:

Dido and Anna Present an Unexpected Lesson of Sisterhood

Brooke Genevieve Bierdz, Rhodes College

So this is what it was all about, Sister.

You cheated me, didn't you? This is what

Your pyre was for, your altars, your fire –

To deceive me. What should I lament first,

Deserted like this? Did you scorn my company

In death? You should have called on me

To share your fate, to die by the sword

With the same agony, at the same moment!

Did I build this pyre with my own hands

Calling upon the gods of our fathers,

So that when you were lying upon it like this

I would not be here? Cruel! You have destroyed

yourself, me, the Sidonian elders, and your city.

Ah, let me bathe her wounds, and if any last breath

Still lingers on her lips, let me catch it on mine.

*(Aeneid 4.784-798)*

Written as a testament to Augustus, the Roman emperor at the time of composition, Virgil's epic poem the *Aeneid* recounts the adventures of Rome's legendary founder, the "pious" Aeneas, from the decimation of Troy to the inhabitation and wars of Lavinium. Virgil

wrote the *Aeneid* in the last years of his life, between 29 and 19 BCE, and upon his deathbed ordered that the manuscript be burned because it was not finished. Thankfully, Virgil's peers did not follow this order, and an intriguing story of war, love, adventure, and family remains for us to enjoy and study today. While documenting the travels and conflicts that Aeneas and his men endure from Troy to Northern Africa to Italy, Virgil offers us a glimpse into numerous familial relationships, such as those between Aeneas and his father Anchises, Aeneas and his wife Creusa, and King Latinus and his wife Amata. Most intriguing of the relationships Virgil describes in the *Aeneid* is that of Dido and her sister Anna. The depth of the sisters' relationship culminates with the suicide of Dido, whose pyre is unknowingly prepared by her devoted sister Anna.

The complex sibling relationship between Dido and Anna begins with Dido seeking advice from Anna regarding her feelings for Aeneas and concludes with the dramatic scene of Dido's suicide as a result of pursuing those feelings of love. In this remarkable scene, Anna reacts emotionally to the revelation that she built the pyre where Dido commits suicide under the pretence of burning all reminders of Aeneas. In this reaction, she experiences a wide range of emotions, including deception, despair, anger, and compassion. The variety of emotions Anna feels and the way she expresses them define sisterhood in all its shame and all its glory. Within the *Aeneid*, this scene comes shortly after Aeneas' departure from Carthage at the demand of the gods; it also explains the animosity between Carthage and the city that will become Rome, animosity that results in a series of Punic Wars from 264 BCE to 146 BCE. At its basis, this passage encapsulates what it truly means to be sisters. Virgil provides us with an

example of the complexities of sisterhood, an important topic for anyone who is a sister herself and for the general understanding of sibling relationships.

As a distressed Anna runs toward Dido, “clawing her face... and beating her breasts” in reaction to learning of Dido’s suicide, Anna addresses Dido as “Sister”: “So this is what it was all about, *Sister*” (*Aeneid* 4.781-782, 4.784, emphasis added). While she could have very easily addressed her sister by name, Anna uses this distinctive term in an attempt to evoke a sense of obligation. Not only is she Dido, Queen of Carthage, but she is also Anna’s sister and calling her so displays the commitment and love that they owe each other; simply calling her Dido does not convey that same sense of obligation. As her sister, Dido should be able to confide in Anna and seek help from her, and the fact that she tricked Anna into preparing the pyre upon which she would kill herself hurts Anna deeply – so deeply that she wants Dido to feel guilty for doing so.

In this and subsequent lines, Anna speaks in rhetorical questions: “You cheated me, didn’t you?... Did you scorn my company in death?” (4.785, 4.788-789). As a figure of speech, rhetorical questions are usually posed to elicit consideration for a particular message or viewpoint, as is the case here. Anna does not expect a reply from Dido, who lay dying atop the pyre; instead, she wants to demonstrate her anger at being so blatantly deceived. While it is evident that she does care about Dido dearly, Anna is still shocked at this devastating occurrence and acts out of anger and retaliation. Before coming to her aid, Anna simply wants Dido to know that her actions and her deceit that led to this devastating event upset her, and she conveys this disappointment through the use of multiple rhetorical questions. The use of

these questions may also serve a cathartic purpose for Anna, who is grappling to put into words all the emotions that she is feeling.

Additionally, Anna speaks in exclamations to convey the strength of her feelings. First she says, “You should have called on me to share your fate, to die by the sword with the same agony, at the same moment!” (4.789-791). These lines demonstrate the immense pain Anna feels at her sister’s death and her willingness to die alongside her. These notions are not to be taken lightly, and thus, she feels the need to exclaim them with emphasis. Anna portrays the same idea when she exclaims, “Cruel!” in reference to the deception Dido employs to have Anna build her pyre (4.795). This time, however, Anna is not expressing pain or sadness but anger instead, anger that her sister would resort to lying in order to get her way.

The repetition of the word “same” in the quote, “to die by the sword with the *same* agony, at the *same* moment!” reiterates the strength of the partnership and the bond between the sisters (4.790-791, emphasis added). This line also demonstrates Anna’s willingness to die alongside her sister. Other great authors have also addressed this willingness to die with a sister; for example, in 441 BCE Sophocles wrote along similar lines in his tragedy *Antigone*. In that play, although Ismene did not take part in the forbidden burial of their brother, she does volunteer to die with her sister Antigone, who did perform burial rites defying the law of Creon. In both of these instances, the non-condemned sister expresses the desire to die with the other. This sentiment speaks volumes about the devotion that exists between sisters. In life and in death, sisters are willing to do whatever it takes to support each other.

The “Ah” that begins line 797 signifies a distinct shift from negative to positive emotions. After experiencing emotions ranging from deception to hurt to despair to anger,

Anna finally calms down enough to realize the calamity of Dido's situation, and then Anna shows great care and compassion for her sister. Anna says, "Ah, let me bathe her wounds, and if any last breath still lingers on her lips, let me catch it on mine" (4.797). At this point, Anna realizes the uselessness of yelling at the dying Dido; instead, she compassionately bathes Dido's wounds and consoles her in her imminent death.

This dramatic scene teems with numerous rhetorical devices and invites the reader to consider multiple interpretations. Upon first glance, it seems as if Anna is attacking Dido while she lies on her deathbed, but in fact, Anna's care and concern for her sister ultimately prevail. It is obvious that the two sisters have a close relationship, but even more obvious is Anna's love for and devotion to Dido. In the beginning of Book Four, Dido approaches Anna with her romantic feelings for Aeneas and seeks advice about what to do; then later at the request of Dido, Anna agrees to speak to Aeneas and to urge him to stay in Carthage. Anna also unquestioningly performs the tasks Dido asked of her in preparing what she thought would be a burning of all things that reminded Dido of Aeneas. In her response to Dido's conflicting emotions, Anna says, "O sister dearer than light itself" (4.37). When Anna hears the cries of the people in response to Dido's suicide, she rushes forward, "clawing her face with her nails, and beating her breasts with her fists" in distress (4.781-783). These actions and her desire to die alongside her sister convincingly demonstrate Anna's undying love for her sister because in these actions, we see that Anna is similar to Aeneas in that he and Anna both are remarkably pious. Their piety is displayed not in a religious sense, but in a sense of duty and obligation; they live their lives very purposefully--Aeneas in his dedication to his people and Anna in her dedication to her sister. This devotion or piety earns them the respect of readers then and now.

What could be viewed as a violent physical attack was simply a step in Anna's natural progression of emotions before finally arriving at the state of love when she realizes that she is losing her sister. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identifies a popularly accepted emotional course for coping with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Bolden 235-236). Anna seems to be coping with her sister's death according to the Kubler-Ross model, or the Five Stages of Grief. First, it is clear that Anna is in denial because for a short time, she disregards that her sister is on her deathbed and proceeds to react angrily to the actions that led them both there. Then, she "bargains" with her sister, wishing to have died alongside her. She almost reverts back to anger as she reprimands her sister, "You have destroyed yourself, me, the Sidonian elders, and your city" before finally accepting the fact that Dido is dying and rushing to her side (4.495-496).

While it is obvious that Anna cares deeply for her sister, it is possible that Dido does not reciprocate the same affection for Anna. We do not see many instances of Dido displaying love for Anna except in asking her for advice; in fact, the main interaction Dido has with Anna is to ask her for favors--to speak to Aeneas or to build her a pyre. In fact, it can be said that Dido blames Anna for the events that transpired, for she says, "You, my dear sister, caving in to my tears, first loaded my frenzied soul with these sorrows and put me in the enemy's path" (4.641-643). While she does call her "my dear sister," Dido also attributes the distress she is experiencing to the advice that Anna gave her to pursue Aeneas. Additionally, Dido tricks her sister into building the pyre that she would later kill herself on under the false pretense of burning Aeneas' possessions, which is not an uncommon response for a woman who has just experienced a failed relationship.

While Dido does not display affection as strongly as Anna, it is possible that these events transpired and culminated in the way that they did because Dido was under the spell of Cupid. Because Juno and Venus intervene and cause her to fall in love with Aeneas, Dido transforms from a capable female leader into a mad-woman. In this chaos, she decides to kill herself and to trick Anna into helping her do it. Thus, Dido's apparent lack of reciprocal affection for Anna could be out of character because it was actually due to the turmoil that Cupid caused at the demand of the gods.

The complex relationship between Dido and Anna says a lot about sisterly love; specifically, it demonstrates its great breadth and strength. Even though Dido may not have reciprocated the great love Anna had for her, Anna nonetheless treated Dido with undying love and concern after yelling a bit and reprimanding her for her irrational actions and deception. Rather than condemning Anna for her words uttered in this passage, we should admire her because her unconditional love for Dido is so obvious in her tirade. Admittedly, Anna initially reacts violently to the situation, but at that point she is overcome with grief and anger. When she calms down and realizes that her sister is dying, she immediately changes her attitude and cares for Dido on her deathbed, proving that she is in fact, a most admirable sister.

This story sets a precedent for sisters everywhere, stressing the importance of love and acceptance of one's sister, faults and all. We are put on this earth with a family, a gift that is important to the development of characteristics and traits that will benefit us later in life. Even more than that, family acts as our safety net, the people who will always be there for us regardless of the circumstances, just as Anna was there for Dido. Family is one of the best, most important things we have in this world, yet it is also one of the most fragile. The

relationship of sisters is no exception; in fact, it may be even more delicate and more vital, and Virgil, when analytically read, conveys a deep, appreciative lesson regarding sisterhood, revealing how important and delicate it is indeed.

#### Works Cited

- Bolden, Lori A. "A Review of 'On Grief and Grieving': Finding the Meaning of Grief through The Five Stages of Loss." *Counseling and Values*. 51.3 (2007): 235-237. *PsycINFO*. 26 March, 2012. Web.
- Virgil. *Aeneid*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005. Print.