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## The Use of Vergil's Aeneid In St. Augustine's Confessions

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# *The Use Of Vergil's Aeneid In St. Augustine's Confessions*

*The Confessions* is a framework in which Augustine uses the traditional pagan conventions found in Vergil's *Aeneid* to convince the pagan reader that his conversion was a realistic and knowledgeable choice. By paralleling his conversion to the spiritual world with the death of Dido, he can include his intended non-Christian audience and ensure its comprehension of some otherwise foreign concepts.

In the story of Dido's suicide, many similarities are drawn between her life and that of Augustine during his conversion. Dido lived only for the love of Aeneas, just as Augustine for a time lived "for nothing but to love and be loved." (*Conf.* Bk.II, Ch.2) Yet Augustine makes the distinction between carnal love and true love — or love of God. Real love, he asserts, is "to love God with his whole heart and his whole soul and his whole mind" and to "love his neighbor as himself." (*Conf.*, Bk.III, Ch.8) He refutes the idea of romantic love or lust by quoting from Corinthians that "a man does well to abstain from all commerce with women,"

and from Matthew that by making himself "a eunuch for love of the kingdom of heaven, 'I should have awaited your embrace with all the greater joy.'" (*Conf.*, Bk.II, Ch.2) By taking the traditional and commonly known story of the *Aeneid* and paralleling it to his own life, Augustine can better convince the reader of his own sense of happiness having followed the way of the Christian doctrine. He must use the *Aeneid*'s ideals in order to familiarize them with his point, yet must also use a Christian text to support his ideas and win credibility among his Christian readers. By following the example of his own life, all readers are encouraged to apply their spiritual beliefs to their everyday lives, and not to be content with an external conformity to the popular religious movement of the time.

Another aspect of the story of Dido is her sister Anna, whom Dido deceives into allowing her to commit suicide. Anna, upon learning what Dido has done, exclaims, "What shall I now, deserted, first lament? You scorned your sister's company in death; you should have called me to the fate you met; the same sword of pain, the same hour should have taken the two of us away." (*Aen.* 4.932-6) This emphasis on the worldly need for human communion from fear of isolation can also be applied to Augustine's life. He struggles with his desire for companionship and his desire to be chaste, for he feels his "will was perverse and lust had grown from it, and when I gave in to lust habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit it became a necessity." (*Conf.*, Bk.VIII, Ch.5) As a youth, he "had prayed for chastity and said 'give me chastity and continence, but not yet.' For I was afraid that you would answer my prayer at once and cure me too soon of the disease of lust, which I wanted satisfied, not quelled." (*Conf.*, Bk.VIII, Ch.7) Just like Anna, Augustine is yet unable to give up his need for human companionship in exchange for the need of God and spirituality: "Because I was more a slave of lust than a true lover of marriage, I took another mistress." (*Conf.*, Bk.VI, Ch.15) This "is true when the higher part of our nature aspires after eternal bliss while our lower self is held back by the love of temporal pleasure. It is the same soul that wills both, but it wills neither of them with the full force of the will. So it is wrenched in two and suffers great trials, because while truth teaches it to prefer one course, habit prevents it from relinquishing the other." (*Conf.*, Bk.VIII, Ch.10)

Augustine also talks of Victorinus' public declaration of his faith, and how, though he had to stand alone, afterward the congregation "seized him and made him their own." (*Conf.*, Bk.VIII, Ch.2) By this example, Augustine points out that finding the truth of God's ways must be done alone and only then one can truly commune with others of the same faith. They are all together in their conviction and direction, but are solitary in their relationship with God "You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer desired or placed any hope in this world but stood firmly upon the rule of faith."(*Conf.*, Bk.VIII, Ch.12). Augustine, like Anna, has finally realized that the passage into spirituality must be done alone. Using Dido's physical death as the image against which he poses his own "worldly death," he helps the readers unfamiliar with the Christian belief in being "born again" unto God. By comparing philosophy with old knowledge, he brings concreteness to the abstract, and subsequently simplifies their comprehension.

Dido's journey into the spiritual realm took struggle, pain, finally intervention by supernatural forces, just as Augustine's would. Dido "tried to raise herself and strained, propped on her elbow; and three times she fell back upon the couch." (*Aen.*, 4.950-1)) Augustine, on the other hand, "tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees during this agony of indecision." (*Conf.*, Bk.VIII, Ch.8) Though Augustine does experience physical pain, the cause is abstract: it is his suffering, his inability to make a transition from worldly to spiritual, and the need to purge the sin from his soul. He "was in torment, reproaching myself more bitterly than ever as I twisted and turned in my chain. In this way I wrangled with myself, in my own heart, about my own self." (*Conf.*, Bk. VIII, Ch.11) He openly admits the parallel between his own pain and that of Dido when he says,"What can be more pitiful than an unhappy wretch unaware of his own sorry state, bewailing the fate of Dido, who died for love of Aeneas, yet shedding no tears for himself as he dies for want of loving you? Instead I wept for Dido, who surrendered herself to the sword, while I forsook you and surrendered myself to the lowest of your created things." (*Conf.* Bk.I,Ch.13) When Dido is finally ready to die, "Juno pitied her long sorrow and hard death and from Olympus sent Iris down to free the struggling spirit from her entwining limbs." (*Aen.*, 4.955-8) Just as Dido needs help in being

released from the body, Augustine receives a similar miraculous intervention in the final death of his life in the worldly realm. He hears what "could only be a divine command" to read the Bible, and it is "as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled." (*Conf.*, Bk.VIII, Ch.12) Just as Dido finally realizes the light of heaven, Augustine is also purged of his own internal darkness. Again the use of a non-Christian tradition of imagery to describe the inner turmoil and change — from that of darkness into light.

Another interesting parallel in imagery is that after Dido's death, when "the warmth was gone, the life passed to the winds." (*Aen.*, 4.971)) Augustine describes himself as "flesh and blood, no better than a breath of wind." (*Conf.*, Bk.I, Ch.13) Though a seemingly minor detail, it points out the influence of the epic tradition in imagery on Augustine's writing of the *Confessions*. Having been raised a pupil of the old conventions, and having committed to memory much of Vergil's work, Augustine, not surprisingly is much troubled in his conversion to Christianity. He may have used the parallel to Dido, a favorite childhood memory, for his own understanding and reassurance, only to repeat it later to aid others in following his path.

## Works Cited

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