

CASA ESSAY

The essay competition is sponsored by the *Classical Association of South Africa*. This paper was judged to be the best student essay submitted to *CASA* for 2017.

DIAGNOSING VERGIL'S DIDO: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The story of Dido in Vergil's *Aeneid* has captured the interest of many readers and scholars through the years¹ and many different readings and interpretations of Dido and her role in the text exist.² This paper aims to look at Dido through a psychological lens, with the goal of diagnosing her character, much as a modern psychologist would. The strong emotional upheavals and extreme actions of her character warrant looking at her as a clinical psychologist might, and perhaps explaining her actions from a clinical point of view. This may allow us to see her character, her motives and her actions in a new and different way. Instead of looking at Dido in universal or literary terms, this paper aims to look at her as an individual character. Despite the fact that some of her emotions and acts are inspired by gods, the way she reacts to the gods' influence can be argued to stem from her own emotional state. She is thus viewed, throughout this paper, as an agent in her own right, rather than a puppet of the gods.³

Dido's character displays extreme emotional oscillation and she is shown to be capable of moving from being generous and loving the one moment to 'raving' and furious the next. Owing to her emotional outbursts and reactions, and her strong but unstable emotional attachments to romantic partners, including her late husband, Sychaeus, and the Trojan prince, Aeneas (Verg. *Aen. passim*),⁴ it is likely that Dido would fall under the category of the Cluster B of personality disorders as they are found in the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5),⁵ specifically under Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Even though BPD is

¹ Desmond 1994:1-2.

² For political and gendered readings of Dido, see Desmond 1994.

For a philosophical reading, see Dyson 1996:203-221.

For a feminist reading see Van Nievelt 2012.

For literary criticism of Dido's story as well as a comparison between her and a Greek mythological character, see Henry 1930:97-108.

³ Dido is only visited by Cupid once in Book 1 to kindle her love for Aeneas (Verg. *Aen.* 1.712-722). In the view of this work, her actions from there on are her own. Even Juno remarks that Dido 'has let love's madness seep to the depths of her being' (4.101).

⁴ Translation by M Oakley 1997 used throughout, unless otherwise stated.

⁵ American Psychiatric Association 2013.

sometimes argued to be little more than a label placed on people who do not conform to society's standards, a diagnosis of the disorder in a person, can help us better understand that person's way of thinking, their motives and their behaviour.⁶

Borderline Personality Disorder is described as '[a] pattern of instability in self-image, mood, and interpersonal relationships and marked impulsivity; transient dissociative states; highly reactive to real or imagined abandonment'. Many people suffering from this disorder show remission of symptoms after 10-15 years, but relapses can be triggered by traumas or life stressors. In order to decide whether Dido fits the diagnostic criteria for BPD, this paper will look at each symptom listed by the DSM-5 individually and judge how much Dido's character relates to each one. The symptoms of BPD as listed by the DSM-5 are:

1. Out-of-control emotions
2. Unstable interpersonal relationships
3. Concerns about abandonment
4. Self-damaging behaviour
5. Impulsivity
6. The disorder is often accompanied by depression, anxiety or anger.⁷

The symptoms listed in the DSM-5 are usually accompanied by other symptoms or emotional and cognitive deficits, such as an unstable self-image (this unstable image is often what causes instability in interpersonal relationships), dissociative states (usually brought on by extreme emotions) and a feeling of chronic emptiness (which may cause people with BPD to 'cling too tightly to other people' and which may cause their fear of abandonment). These symptoms or deficits are listed as possible causes for the symptoms already listed by the DSM-5 and are also

⁶ It is important to note that personality disorders are often hard to diagnose, since it is difficult to distinguish an exact point where normal, functional personality traits end and abnormal dysfunctional traits begin. BPD is particularly hard to diagnose, owing to the 'variety of symptoms ... and their shifting nature' in this disorder, according to Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:251, 263. Furthermore, there is quite some controversy surrounding BPD, including whether it is simply a label or stigma applied to people who do not conform to a patriarchal society's standards of behaviour or to women who do not conform to stereotypical gender roles (Shaw & Proctor 2005:483-490; Capes-Ivy 2010; Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:252), whether diagnosis of the disorder itself leads to further gender stereotyping and stigma (Nehls 1998:97-112) and questions as to why the disorder is diagnosed more often in women and people of colour (Bjorklund 2006:3-23; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2014:264, 279). Nevertheless, it is still a valid psychological diagnosis found in the DSM-5 and I will use it, because I feel it adds value to understanding Dido, her personality and her motivations in new ways.

⁷ American Psychiatric Association 2013.

considered to be part of the disorder.⁸ They will therefore be discussed along with the symptoms in the diagnostic criteria.

Possible remission

In Aeneas' first encounter with Dido, she is in full regal splendour, '[passing] amid them with joy', '[eager] to help on the work of her fast-growing realm' and ruling with apparent grace and intelligence (1.503-504). She is a queen who has founded her own city and essentially built it from the ground up. By the time Aeneas arrives in Carthage, there are still great building projects being undertaken in the city (1.423-425). Dido has survived and even thrived after suffering great losses. Her own brother murdered her beloved husband and stole her share of their father's kingdom (1.340-349). It initially seems as if Dido is an exceptionally strong and well-adjusted person, yet this does not preclude a diagnosis of BPD. It is possible that Dido was in a state of remission from BPD when Aeneas meets her for the first time. People in remission from this disorder show better ability in holding jobs and being productive, but they still have trouble in forming stable interpersonal relationships.⁹ This can be applied to Dido's character as well, since she was able to successfully build and rule over a kingdom, but could not recover from her husband's death and feared forming any new romantic bonds. She says that she had 'made up [her] mind / Never to couple [herself] in marriage again, / After [her] first love, by dying, cheated [her] heart'. She refuses marriage proposals from any suitors, including the ruler of a neighbouring kingdom, King Iarbas (4.15-17, 35-37). When Cupid works to make Dido fall in love with Aeneas, he is said to be '[storming] her long-stifled feelings' (1.721-722), which may refer to the Borderline symptom of out-of-control emotions which is in remission. Traumas and stressful events can cause a relapse of symptoms in people with BPD.¹⁰ In the case of Dido, Aeneas and her love for him, along with his subsequent abandonment of her, might have been triggers for relapse. After falling in love with Aeneas, Dido exhibits more of the classic symptoms of BPD.

⁸ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:263-265.

⁹ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:264.

¹⁰ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:264.

Diagnosis

Symptom 1: Out-of-control-emotions

The first symptom of BPD is out-of-control emotions. People with the disorder experience rapidly changing and extreme moods, often anger or intense depression. Dido exhibits out-of-control emotions quite regularly throughout Book 4 of the *Aeneid*. She experiences sudden and intense love for Aeneas and seemingly his son, Iulus, as well, almost immediately after meeting them (1.712-722). It is so fervent that she begins to forget her attachment to her late husband, Sychaeus, whom she had sworn to stay loyal to (4.20-23, 54-55). Her feelings of love and passion are not described simply in joyful terms, but in terms of suffering. Dido's feelings are overwhelming, intense and painful with a rather sudden onset. Her love for Aeneas is compared to a 'wound' which she '[feeds] ... with her life-blood' and also to fire which '[eats] at her heart unseen'. She is said to be 'maddened with love'. She wanders through the city 'in a frenzy' and seems to be driven to intense psychological distress by her feelings for Aeneas to the point where she has nightmares and crying spells (4.1-2, 65-79). She struggles to express her feelings to Aeneas, leaving 'her phrases half finished' (4.76), and this also fits in with BPD behaviour. People with BPD struggle to cope with, and regulate difficult emotions, and they rely on the support of others to help them do this. Yet, since they have low self-esteem, they struggle to express these emotions and need for support 'in mature ways' and owing to this, they may even become manipulative in their attempts to gain others' support.¹¹ When Dido suspects that Aeneas is going to leave her, her emotions spiral out of control and she is compared to a 'Bacchante'.¹² She becomes intensely angry at Aeneas when she confronts him about leaving. She admits her own anger, by saying 'I am carried along by the flame of my frenzy'. She insults Aeneas and wishes suffering and regret upon him before fainting, indicating that she is clearly overwhelmed by emotion. Afterwards she cannot sleep and her love for Aeneas is said to '[rise] once more to the surface', while she also '[tosses] to and fro on the mounting tide of her rage' (4.300-301, 362-392, 532).

The intense and shifting emotions of people with BPD can be so overwhelming that people suffering from the disorder sometimes experience dissociative states. During dissociative states, people may 'feel unreal, lose track of time' or 'even forget who they are'.¹³ Dido shows possible signs of going into

¹¹ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:265.

¹² A bacchante was an 'orgiastic worshipper or priestess' of Bacchus. She celebrated the Bacchanalia festival, in which the most important event involved the worshippers tearing apart an animal and then eating it with their hands (Shipley 1984:245-246).

¹³ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:263.

dissociative states. This may be seen in her aimless wandering through the city, during which she is 'in a frenzy' or in her moments of loneliness without Aeneas when she hears and sees him, despite his absence (4.68-69, 83). Later, when she is in a very emotional and anguished state while Aeneas is leaving, she wants her fleet to set out after him and attack it. While she is shouting commands, she suddenly says, 'What am I saying? Where am I?' as if she has gone into a state of dissociation (4.584-595).

Symptom 2: Unstable interpersonal relationships

The second symptom of BPD is 'unstable interpersonal relationships' which is usually associated with an unstable self-concept. People suffering from this disorder may vacillate between 'extreme self-doubt' and 'grandiose self-importance'.¹⁴ When Dido's behaviour is considered, her own self-concept also appears to shift between extremes. After she and Aeneas are trapped in a cave together, they are informally married by the goddess Juno. This pseudo-marriage causes Dido to make her love for Aeneas public and she stops caring about her reputation and how she is viewed as a ruler (4.160-172). She loses interest in herself and her kingdom in favour of her interest in Aeneas. When Aeneas plans on leaving her, Dido seems to lose all personal pride. At first she cries and begs him to stay in a way that can be considered manipulative. She desperately asks him to at least leave her with a child, but when this also fails, she curses him and faints. After that she asks her sister to beg him to stay for a little while longer at least, if he does not want to remain permanently (4.296-330, 362-392, 416-436). She swallows more and more of her pride as she asks less and less of him. This indicates that she has a rather low self-esteem. At other times, Dido seems to be self-assured and have self-importance. She first appears in the *Aeneid* in full regal splendour, and later when going on a hunt, Dido makes everyone wait for her while she gets ready (4.133-136). Even in her speeches begging Aeneas to stay, her erratic shifting between self-importance and self-doubt (at times self-loathing) can be seen (4.314-323). Her first assumption is that Aeneas is leaving because he is 'fleeing from her' (4.314). She talks about her 'former renown' which she has lost owing to her relationship with Aeneas (4.322-323), but after Aeneas leaves she mentions that she could barely convince her own people to leave their country and move to Carthage with her (4.544-546).

In their relationships, people with BPD may exhibit 'black and white' thinking, where they view a person as either 'all good' or 'all bad'. People suffering from BPD can shift between adoring a person one moment and hating

¹⁴ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:263.

them the next.¹⁵ In Dido's case, it can be seen that she falls very deeply in love with Aeneas and initially obsesses over him. However, her love for Aeneas (and even his son, Iulus) quickly turns to extreme anger and hatred when Aeneas decides to leave. In fact, her hatred is so strong that she places a horrible curse upon him and his entire race and at one point she even mentions that she wishes she had killed Iulus and fed him to his father. Her hatred drives her to consider commanding her fleet to attack Aeneas and kill him and his people (4.362-387, 544, 591-629). After Dido's death, Aeneas encounters her once again in the underworld. Here, she seems to be still be filled with anger and resentment to him and she does not even react when he tries to speak to her, except by running away (6.466-474). Her feelings of love for Aeneas have turned to hatred, anger and resentment.

Symptom 3: Concerns about abandonment

The unstable nature of the relationships of BPD sufferers usually stems from their unstable self-concept and their subsequent tendency to cling to others in order to fill their own internal feelings of emptiness. They also rely on others to support their insecure self-esteem. This reliance leads to an excessive fear of abandonment and therefore they usually cling very tightly to people that they are in relationships with.¹⁶ This is the third symptom of BPD listed by the DSM-5. The first example of this in Dido's behaviour can be seen in her unwillingness to let go of her late husband and her inability to move on after his death. Despite the fact that her husband is no longer alive, she still holds on to him and refuses to enter into a new relationship until she meets Aeneas. It is even revealed later that she kept a shrine for her late husband in her palace until her own death (4.457-458). Another early example occurs in Book 1 when Dido holds Aeneas's son, Iulus, on her lap. It is said that she '[c]lung to him' and it seems that she becomes almost instantly very attached to him (1.717-718). The fear of being abandoned can be so extreme that it persists despite the fact that there is no evidence to back it up. People with BPD may interpret innocuous actions from others as abandonment.¹⁷ Dido begins to suspect that Aeneas is going to leave her even before he has shown any signs that he is planning it. She already 'feared / When fear there was none' (4.296-298). She herself admits that she sacrificed her chastity, the respect and allegiance of the Libyan tribes, the 'Nomadic chieftains' and her own people as well as her 'former renown' for Aeneas (4.320-323). When Aeneas leaves, Dido is described as 'alone' and 'treading a long, long road with no one beside her' (4.466-468), which is indicative of feelings of emptiness. Thus her attachment to Aeneas was evidently

¹⁵ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:263; 265.

¹⁶ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:263; 265.

¹⁷ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:263.

extremely strong and could be seen as pathological. Previously, her self-concept and self-esteem were tied to her identity as an independent ruler, queen and widow, but after Aeneas arrives, her self-concept becomes tied up in him and his view of her. She is convinced that her whole world will fall apart when Aeneas leaves her, because she has made him the centre of her self-concept and identity. This shows excessive reliance and dependence upon him. After Dido's death, Aeneas meets her in the underworld in Book 6 of the *Aeneid*. He tries to talk to her, but she flees from him and back to her husband Sychaeus. Even as a shade in the underworld, she shows dependent attachment upon another person (6.456-474). The fact that she is able to ignore Aeneas, whom she was previously very attached to, indicates that she has renewed her intense attachment to her husband and instead focuses on him as a source of support and an anchor for her self-concept.

Symptoms 4 and 5: Self-damaging behaviour and impulsivity

The manner in which people with BPD react to abandonment, along with a difficulty in regulating emotions, lead to the fourth and fifth symptoms of the disorder: extreme and impulsive behaviours, which are often self-damaging. These behaviours may be used by the person suffering from BPD to manipulate others into staying with them, to get the attention and support of others or simply as self-punishment in times when the person's self-esteem is low.¹⁸ Dido shows several examples of extreme, impulsive and dramatic behaviour. She is entirely dragged along by the stream of her emotions and considers herself married to Aeneas after a fairly short time. Their 'wedding' is not considered a true exchange of vows by Aeneas (4.338-339),¹⁹ although it was enough for Dido to allow their relationship to be publically known. This can be considered to be hasty and impulsive behaviour. It is also self-damaging, because she stopped caring about 'appearances' and- 'chaste reputation' when she allowed her relationship with Aeneas to be made public. In her state of passionate love, she allows work in her kingdom to cease, which is damaging to everything she has been building and developing. She lets herself, her kingdom and her reputation go. This is a large shift from her as a regal queen who refused suitors so as to remain faithful to her late husband. After Dido stops trying to be discreet about her love for Aeneas, one of her previous suitors, King Iarbas, finds out and is extremely angry (4.196-197). Thus she has angered a neighbouring kingdom and later Dido herself says that she has lost allies and the love of her own people owing to this self-destructive behaviour (4.320-323). Her behaviour becomes truly extreme and dramatic when

¹⁸ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:263; 265.

¹⁹ Although it could be argued that Aeneas is the one who is in the wrong here. Their wedding was, after all, ordained by Juno, the goddess of marriage, herself.

Aeneas decides to leave. Instances of her impulsive behaviour after his decision to depart have been mentioned earlier and these include the fact that she begs Aeneas to stay using very emotive and manipulative language ('Can our love not keep you, nor your right hand once given in a vow, nor the fact that Dido will die a cruel and violent death?'),²⁰ then directly afterwards curses him, before sending her sister to beg him to stay once again. She decides to commit suicide when Aeneas refuses even this request (4.305-330, 382-387, 416-436, 450-451).

The self-harming tendencies of people with BPD often lead to suicidal behaviour. It is estimated that about 75% of people with the disorder attempt suicide, while 10% of people with the disorder actually die by suicide.²¹ As may be expected from someone suffering from BPD, Dido chooses a rather dramatic way in which to take her own life. She asks for her own pyre to be built under the false pretence that she only wishes to burn everything that Aeneas has left behind, including their marriage bed. She places all the 'relics' he left on the pyre, intent on being burned along with them after she has stabbed herself with a sword that Aeneas gave her (4.474-499, 642-665). In this, Dido shows both signs of excessive attachment to another person, to the point where abandonment drives her to extremes as well as suicidal and impulsive behaviour. The fact that she hopes Aeneas will see the flames of her burning pyre after her death (4.661-662) might indicate a form of manipulative behaviour. Even after her death, she still does not want him to be able to abandon her easily and she still wishes to gain his support, love and even pity in a very indirect and roundabout way. Dido behaves impulsively out of fear of abandonment, low self-esteem and a feeling that she has nothing in her life left to live for, but also as an attempt to manipulate Aeneas into staying with her, which are all typical reasons for such behaviour in people with BPD.

Symptom 6: The disorder is often accompanied by depression, anxiety or anger

Dido exhibits excessive anger throughout the text and many examples of this have already been given. She also exhibits some of the classical symptoms of depression, which are included in the DSM-5 as hopelessness, thoughts of suicide and anhedonia (a loss of interest in life and activities the person previously valued or enjoyed).²² Dido seems to lose interest in her life outside of Aeneas when she falls in love with him, since she allows all the building projects and important activities in her kingdom to come to a standstill. She does not seem to care about any of her previous interests or her kingdom, but instead spends all her time with

²⁰ Author's own translation.

²¹ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:264.

²² Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:177.

Aeneas and listening to his stories. In the evenings, when Aeneas is not around, Dido spends her time crying (4.74-89). She experiences strong feelings of hopelessness and despair when Aeneas decides to leave Carthage. She is 'sick of the sight of the day' and longs to die (4.450-451). This does not necessarily indicate that Dido suffered from clinical depression, but it does indicate that symptoms of depression were present, as is common in people with BPD.²³

BPD is a disorder characterised by instability and constant shifting between extremes, which could offer a good description of the character of Dido in the *Aeneid*. Her character is one of contradictions, as she is shown to be both a generous, strong queen, but also a woman driven to madness and suicide by love. Her ability to show strong, intense love for Aeneas does not stop her from being able to feel the same level of hatred towards him and her emotions and feelings for others reflect the borderline trait of instability. Looking at Dido as a person suffering from BPD can help us understand her in a whole new way and clarify some of her motives, which may seem uncertain. It is something that makes her unique as a character and reveals a side to her that readers may not have been previously aware of.

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²³ Nolen-Hoeksema 2014:264.

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