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Fire of Passion
George Caldwell

Many of the *Aeneid*'s most pivotal scenes are set against a backdrop of fire. In the burning of Troy, Dido's self-immolation, and the epic's various fire-omens, Vergil uses fire like the Hollywood pyrotechnics of today to bring a thrilling sense of danger to the epic. However, Vergil also employs the image with great subtlety to illustrate his character's struggles to control their passions.

The *Aeneid*'s hero, Aeneas, shows fortitude as he fights for his people through hardships. However, as often as he displays self mastery, Aeneas also struggles to master his own passions, such as rage and lust. Vergil often likens these passions to an uncontrollable fire. While the Greeks are burning down Troy, fiery spirits from within call Aeneas to fight for a doomed cause:

*Sed glomerare manum bello et concurrere in arcem
cum sociis ardent animi; furor iraque mentem praecipitat,
pulchrumque mori succurrit in armis. (II.315-317)*

But my spirits burn to gather a company for war and charge with
comrades into the hilltop; rage and anger hurry the mind along, to
die in war comes to mind as beautiful.

Notable in this first person account is that Aeneas shifts agency away from himself by saying that his *animi*, or "spirits," are what burns for war, not himself. Aeneas gives in to the urge and rashly marches into battle, risking his life unnecessarily.

Aeneas' fiery passion and bloodlust threaten him further when he ponders murdering Helen for revenge:

*Exarsere ignes animo; subit ira cadentem
ulcisci patriam et sceleratas sumere poenas. (II.575-576)*

The flames in my spirit blazed up; it comes to mind to avenge the
falling fatherland with wrath and to inflict wicked punishments.

Once again, agency is shifted away from Aeneas to the flames within him, or, "*ignes*." Although he does not act on this particular urge, his passion almost leads him to murder a woman, which would have made him an unsuitable founder of Rome. In these scenes of battle, the image of fire makes Aeneas's internal conflicts more accessible to the reader.

Vergil also makes great use of the fire image in passages on love and lust. During Aeneas' time in Carthage, Queen Dido is consumed by lust for him and tortured by memories of

her deceased husband. Throughout this romance, the flame of passion continues to harm those it possesses. Vergil describes Dido's love as agonizing:

*At regina gravi iamdudum saucia cura
vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni. (IV.1-2)*

And the queen long since wounded by heavy sorrow nourishes the wound in her veins and is torn by an invisible flame.

Another similarity between Aeneas and Dido is that despite their lack of control, they are aware of the flame that burns within them. Dido admits that Aeneas is rekindling the love she had for her late husband:

Agnosco veteris vestigia flammae. (IV.23)

I recognize the remnants of the old flame.

The narrator, the gods, and the humans themselves are all aware of this fire, talking about it at length.

Aeneas again falls to lust when he enters a sexual union with Dido, despite his duty to found the Roman race across the sea. Just as when he raved through burning Troy with no thought for destiny, Aeneas is controlled by his passion. In fact, the Trojan requires divine intervention to remind him of his priorities. Jupiter sends Mercury to remind Aeneas to leave for Rome to fulfill his duties to his son. Dido, seeing that Aeneas is leaving, curses him and returns to her palace. There, she burns herself to death on a pyre covered with objects that remind her of Aeneas. The Queen's death is a visual representation of passion's consequences: to be wholly consumed by an object of desire and then reduced to nothing.

The final passage of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas kills the surrendering Turnus, calls the hero's virtue into question. Aeneas has defeated Turnus in a duel, who admits defeat and begs for mercy. The hero considers the proposition but sees that Turnus is wearing the belt of his friend Pallas, whom Turnus killed:

*Ille, oculis postquam saevi monimenta doloris exuviasque hausit,
furiis accensus et ira
terribilis (XII.945-947)*

That one, after he took in with his eyes the reminders and spoils of wild grief, inflamed with furies and terrible with anger...

He is again inflamed, *accensus*, with rage, just as he was in Troy. He slays Turnus:

Ferrum adverso sub pectore condit fervidus. (XII.950)

Boiling, he buries his sword under the opposite chest.

If one had hoped that Aeneas would have cooled his fiery, destructive passions by the end of the epic, this last scene is a disappointment.

Furthermore, Aeneas' vengeance violates the commandment of mercy that his dead father gave him in the underworld:

*Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento
(hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,
parcere subiectis et debellare superbos* (VI.851-853)

Remember to rule the peoples with law, Roman, (these will be your arts), to impose custom to peace, to spare the conquered and subdue the proud.

An attentive reader of the *Aeneid* will be struck by the failures of Aeneas, which do not seem to benefit the father of the Roman race. Throughout the poem, Aeneas's struggles with his passions are made striking and accessible through this image of fire.