

Ut cera liquescit: Love Magic in Aeneid IV

While she is building her funeral pyre in *Aeneid* 4, Dido disguises her true intentions by telling Anna that she is preparing a magic ritual that will either return Aeneas to her or release her from loving him. This scene goes on for some 45 lines and includes puzzling details, including a priestess character who applies magical ingredients to the pyre and gives an incantation over it, as well as the fact that Dido has an effigy of Aeneas on the pyre with her. Is there any point to this, besides being a ruse that allows Dido to build an elaborate pyre without raising suspicions? This paper argues that Dido's position as a victim of love compelled by divine forces in *Aeneid* Book 4 is echoed symbolically in the text by parallels with ancient love magic, particularly as portrayed in Horace's *Satire* 1.8, his *Epode* 5, and Vergil's own *Eclogue* 8.

In one of Dido's curses on Aeneas, she says that she will pursue him as an avenging ghost *atris ignibus*, "with black fires," (*Aeneid* 4.479). The earliest surviving use of this strange phrase and the only other one in the same form is in Horace's *Epode* 5, which depicts witches preparing a love-charm by torturing a young boy to produce magical ingredients. *Epode* 5 comes in a tradition of poetry about magical love charms, including Vergil's *Eclogue* 8 and Horace's *Satire* 1.8. Vergil's *Eclogue* 8 describes a woman charming a man to love her by making a wax effigy of the man and a clay one of herself, then throwing both in a fire (Faraone, 1989). The wax one melts to soften the man by sympathetic magic, while the clay one will stiffen the resolve of the woman by hardening in the fire. Horace's *Satire* 1.8 also has a rite performed with two effigies, including a wax one that is thrown into a fire. Uses of twin effigies are attested in the actual practice of Greco-Roman love magic, as in a love spell from the *Greek Magical Papyri* that prescribes making two clay figures and inserting nails into the figure representing the love

object to torture her until she submits to love (Faraone, 297). By using the phrase *atris ignibus* from *Epode 5*, Vergil evokes these ideas in the *Aeneid*. Love spells enter the text explicitly later, when Dido tells Anna that she is performing a ritual to either free herself of love or compel Aeneas to love her (*Aeneid* 4.478-479). Although Dido is involved with these preparations, she is not in the position of the witch who has the arcane knowledge to accomplish such a ritual. There is a separate witch character in Book 4 who is described in similar terms as the witches in *Epode 5*. Meanwhile, Dido in Book 4 is more parallel to the innocent boy in *Epode 5*, who curses the witches killing him to be haunted by his ghost much as Dido curses Aeneas. Just as the boy is mere collateral damage in sinister love magic, so Dido in the *Aeneid* is a pawn in a divine plot that has nothing to do with her. The fires of love with which she is afflicted are turned into the fires of her funeral pyre. This pyre is itself in some sense the scene of a love ritual, for it contains an effigy of Aeneas that is presumably burnt along with Dido's body. If Dido is not the witch, how does she fit into this magical scene? The similar rituals in *Eclogue 8*, *Satire 1.8* and the magical papyri might provide a clue. As we have seen, this kind of rite involved two effigies: one representing the beneficiary of the spell and one representing the target. If in some symbolic sense, a love spell is being enacted with the burning of the pyre, then Dido herself must be the second "effigy." If this is the case, she is not the image of the dominant party, but of the one afflicted by the love-curse. Just as the effigy of the love-object was pierced with nails in some rituals, so Dido is pierced by Aeneas's sword. Just as the wax doll is consumed by the fire in *Eclogue 8* and *Satire 1.8*, so Dido's corpse is consumed. In the pattern of *Eclogue 8*, Dido is the wax, melted by the fire of love, and Aeneas is the clay, hardened in his resolve to go on. Thus the magical imagery of Dido's death reflects the way that she is undone by love compelled from outside forces.

Works Cited

- Faraone, Christopher A. "Clay Hardens and Wax Melts: Magical Role-Reversal in Vergil's Eighth Eclogue." *Classical Philology* 84, no. 4 (1989): 294-300.
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