

Magic and Catharsis in Theocritus' *Idyll* 2 and Vergil's *Aeneid* 4

**Link to Abstract:** <https://camws.org/sites/default/files/meeting2020/abstracts/2005MagicTheocritus.pdf>

**1. *Aeneid* 4.509–521:** Dido performs a ritual with the Ethiopian priestess. Relevant portions reprinted below.

stant arae circum et crinis effusa sacerdos		Round about stand altars, and with streaming hair the
ter centum tonat ore deos, Erebumque Chaosque	510	priestess calls in thunder tones on thrice a hundred gods,
tergeminamque Hecaten, tria virginis ora Dianae.		Erebos and Chaos, and threefold Hecate, triple-faced
sparserat et latices simulatos fontis Averni;		virgin Diana. Waters, too, she had sprinkled feigned to be
falcibus et messae ad lunam quaeruntur aënis		from the spring Avernus, and herbs were sought, cut by
pubentes herbae nigri cum lacte veneni;		moonlight with brazen sickles, and juicy with milk of
quaeritur et nascentis equi de fronte revulsus	515	black venom; sought, too, was the love charm, torn from
et matri praereptus amor ...		the brow of a colt at birth before the mother snatched it ...
ipsa mola manibusque piis altaria iuxta,		She herself, with holy meal and holy hands, stood beside
unum exuta pedem vinclis, in veste recincta,		the altars, one foot unsandalled and girdle loosened; soon
testatur moritura deos et conscia fati		to die, she calls on the gods and on the stars, witnesses of
sidera; tum, si quod non aequo foedere amantis	520	her doom; then she prays to whatever power, righteous
curae numen habet iustumque memorque, precatur.		and mindful, watches over lovers unequally allied. <sup>1</sup>

**2A. *Idyll* 2.40–41:** Simaetha voices her shame.  
ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τήνῳ πᾶσα καταίθομαι ὅς με τάλαιναν  
ἀντὶ γυναικὸς ἔθηκε κακὰν καὶ ἀπάρθρον ἦμεν.

The whole of me is burning for the man who made me disgraced—wretch that I am—and no longer a virgin, instead of his wife.<sup>2</sup>

**2B. *Aeneid* 4.316, 321–323:** Dido voices her shame.  
Per conubia nostra, per inceptos hymenaeos  
...  
... te propter eundem  
exstinctus pudor et, qua sola sidera adibam,  
fama prior ...

[B]y the marriage that is ours, by the nuptial rites begun ... Because of you I have also lost my honor and that former fame by which alone I was winning a title to the stars.

**3A. *Idyll* 2.10–13:** Simaetha invokes Selene and Hecate.  
... ἀλλά, **Σελήνα**,  
φαῖνε καλόν· τιν γὰρ ποταεῖσομαι ἄσυχᾳ, δαῖμον,  
τᾶ χθονία θ' Ἐκάτα, τὰν καὶ σκύλακες τρομέοντι  
ἐρχομένην νεκύων ἀνά τ' ἠρία καὶ μέλαν αἶμα.

Cast a fair light, **Selene**: to you I shall chant softly, goddess, and to **Hecate** in the underworld, at whom even dogs tremble when she comes among the tombs of the dead and the black blood.

**3B. *Idyll* 2.33–36:** Simaetha invokes Artemis and Hecate.  
... τὸ δ', **Ἄρτεμι**, καὶ τὸν ἐν Ἄϊδα  
κινήσας ἀδάμαντα καὶ εἴ τί περ ἀσφαλὲς ἄλλο—  
Θεστυλί, ταὶ κύνες ἄμμιν ἀνὰ πτόλιν ὠρύονται  
ἀ θεὸς ἐν τριόδοισι· τὸ χαλκῆον ὡς τάχος ἄχει.

You, **Artemis**, who can move the adamant of Hades and anything else as firmly fixed—Thestylis, the dogs are howling for us in the town: the goddess is at the crossroads [Hecate]—clash the bronze quick as you can.

**3C. *Aeneid* 4.510–511:** The priestess invokes “threefold Hecate” and “triple-faced” Diana.

ter centum tonat ore deos, Erebumque Chaosque		She calls in thunder tones on thrice a hundred gods,
<b>tergeminamque Hecaten, tria virginis ora Dianae.</b>		Erebos and Chaos, and <b>threefold Hecate, triple-faced</b>
		<u>virgin Diana</u>

<sup>1</sup> Text of Vergil comes from Mynors 1969. Translation is adapted from Fairclough 1999 and 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Text and Translation of Theocritus are adapted from Hopkinson 2015.

Magic and Catharsis in Theocritus' *Idyll* 2 and Vergil's *Aeneid* 4

**4A.** *Idyll* 2.161–162: Simaetha enlists the help of an Assyrian priestess.

τοῖά οἱ ἐν κίστῃ κακὰ φάρμακα φαμί φυλάσσειν,  
Ἀσσυρίῳ, δέσποινα, παρὰ ξείνοιο μαθοῖσα.

Such evil drugs, I say, I keep in my box, which I learned about, Queen Moon, from an Assyrian stranger.

**4B.** *Aeneid* 4.483: Dido enlists the help of an Massylian priestess.

hinc mihi Massylae gentis monstrata sacerdos.

Thence a priestess of Massylian race has been shown to me.

**5A.** *Idyll* 2.48–51: Simaetha compares Delphis to the plant *hippomanes*.

ἵππομανῆς φυτόν ἐστὶ παρ' Ἀρκάσι, τῷ δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσαι  
καὶ πῶλοι μαίνονται ἀν' ὄρεα καὶ θοαὶ ἵπποι·  
ὥς καὶ Δέλφιν ἴδοιμι, καὶ ἐς τόδε δῶμα περάσαι  
μαινομένῳ ἵκελος λιπαρᾶς ἔκτοσθε παλαίστρας.

**Hippomanes** is a plant which grows among the Arcadians, and in the mountains all the foals and swift horses are mad for it; just so may I see Delphis, just so may he come to this house from the glossy wrestling school, like a man made mad.

**5B.** *Aeneid* 4.515–516: The priestess uses the horse *hippomanes*.

quaeritur et nascentis equi de fronte revulsus  
et matri praereptus amor ...

sought, too, was the love charm, torn from the brow of a colt at birth before the mother snatched it ...

**5C.** *Aeneid* 4.514: Vergil alludes to the plant *hippomanes*.

pubentes herbae nigri cum lacte veneni

Herbs juicy with the milk of black venom

**6A.** *Idyll* 2. 18, 23–24, 28–29, 33: Simaetha attempts to burn Delphis.

ἄλφιτά τοι πρᾶτον πυρὶ τακέται.

...

ἐγὼ δ' ἐπὶ Δέλφιδι δάφναν / αἶθω.

...

ὥς τοῦτον τὸν κηρὸν ἐγὼ σὺν δαίμονι τάκω,  
ὥς τάκοιθ' ὑπ' ἔρωτος ὁ Μύνδιος αὐτίκα Δέλφιν.

...

νῦν θυσῶ τὰ πίθηρα.

First barley grains are **melted in the fire**.

...

[A]gainst Delphis I **burn** this laurel.

...

As I with the goddess's aid **melt** this wax, so may Myndian Delphis **melt** at once with love.

...

Now I shall **burn** the bran.

**6B.** *Idyll* 2. 40, 82–86: Simaetha burns for Delphis.

πᾶσα καταίθομαι.

...

χῶς ἴδον, ὡς ἐμάνην, ὡς μοι πυρὶ θυμὸς ἰάφθη  
δειλαιάς, τὸ δὲ κάλλος ἐτάκετο. οὐκέτι πομπᾶς  
τήνας ἐφρασάμαν, οὐδ' ὡς πάλιν οἴκαδ' ἀπῆνθον  
ἔγνω, ἀλλὰ μέ τις καπυρὰ νόσος ἐξεσάλαξεν,  
κείμεν δ' ἐν κλιντῆρι δέκ' ἅματα καὶ δέκα νύκτας.

**The whole of me is burning.**

...

And when I saw them [Delphis and his friend] I was seized with madness, and my wretched heart was caught with **fire**, and my beauty **melted** away. I no longer took notice of that procession, and I had no idea how I got home again, but a **burning fever** shook me, and I lay on my bed ten days and ten night

**6C.** *Idyll* 2.130–134: Delphis is resistant to burning.

νῦν δὲ χάριν μὲν ἔφαν τᾶ Κύπριδι πρᾶτον ὀφείλειν,  
καὶ μετὰ τὰν Κύπριν τύ με δευτέρα ἐκ πυρὸς εἴλευ,  
ὦ γύναι, ἐσκαλέσασα τεὸν ποτὶ τοῦτο μέλαθρον  
αὐτῶς ἡμίφλεκτον· Ἔρωσ δ' ἄρα καὶ Λιπαραῖο  
πολλάκις Ἀφαιστοιο σέλας φλογερότερον αἶθει.

But as it is I say thanks are due to Cypris; and, after Cypris, you next have **saved me from the fire**, lady, by summoning me, quite half-consumed, to this house of yours. Often Love **kindles a blaze more fiery** than does Hephaestus on Lipari.

Magic and Catharsis in Theocritus' *Idyll* 2 and Vergil's *Aeneid* 4

7A. *Idyll* 2.10–11: Simaetha asks the moon to shine brightly.

ἀλλά, Σελάνα, / φαῖνε καλόν.

Cast a fair light, Moon.

7B. *Idyll* 2.78–80: Delphis shined brighter than the moon.

τοῖς δ' ἤς ξανθοτέρα μὲν ἐλιχρύσοιο γενειάς,  
στήθεα δὲ στίλβοντα πολὺ πλέον ἢ τὺ, Σελάνα,  
ὡς ἀπὸ γυμνασίου καλὸν πόνον ἄρτι λιπόντων.

Their beards were blonder than the gold flower and **their chests gleamed much more than you, Moon**, because they had just left the fair exercise of the gymnasium.

8A. *Idyll* 2.21, 62: The role of speaking in Simaetha's ritual.

πάσσω ἅμα καὶ λέγε ταῦτα· “τὰ Δέλφιδος ὅστια πάσσω.”

[A]nd at the same time say, “I scatter the bones of Delphis.”

...

καὶ λέγ' ἐπιτρύζοισα “τὰ Δέλφιδος ὅστια μᾶσσω.”

[A]nd say in a whisper, “I knead the bones of Delphis.”

8B. *Idyll* 2.108–110: Simaetha is unable to speak before Delphis.

οὐδέ τι φωνῆσαι δυνάμαν, οὐδ' ὄσσον ἐν ὕπνῳ  
κνυζεῦνται φωνεῦντα φίλαν ποτὶ ματέρα τέκνα·  
ἀλλ' ἐπάγην δαγῶδι καλὸν χροῖα πάντοθεν ἴσα.

I could say **nothing**, not even as much as children whimper in their sleep, crying to their own dear mother: my fair body became stiff, just like a **wax doll**.

9. *Idyll* 2. 55–56: Simaetha compares her love sickness to a leech.

αἰαῖ Ἔρωσ ἀνιαρέ, τί μεν μέλαν ἐκ χροῶς αἵμα ἐμφὺς ὡς  
λιμναῖτις ἅπαν ἐκ βδέλλα πέπωκας;

Ah, cruel Love, why, like a leech from the marsh, have you fastened on me and drunk all the black blood from my body?

10A. *Idyll* 2.164: Simaetha “endures” her desire.

ἐγὼ δ' οἰσῶ τὸν ἐμὸν πόθον ὥσπερ ὑπέσταν.

I will bear my desire as I have borne it till now.

10B. *Idyll* 11.80–81: Polyphemus “manages” his love.

οὕτω τοι Πολύφαμος ἐποίμαινεν τὸν ἔρωτα  
μουσίσδων ...

In this way Polyphemus **shepherded** his love with singing ...

10C. *Eclogue* 8.108: Alpheisibeous' song ends with similar ambiguity.

credimus? an, qui amant, ipsi sibi somnia fingunt?

Can I trust my eyes? Or do lovers fashion their own dreams?

11A. *Aeneid* 1.683–688: Cupid infects Dido with a *venenum*.

tu faciem illius noctem non amplius unam  
falle dolo, et notos pueri puer indue vultus,  
ut, cum te gremio accipiet laetissima Dido  
regalis inter mensas laticemque Lyaeum, 685  
cum dabit amplexus atque oscula dulcia figet,  
occultum inspires ignem fallasque **veneno**.

For but a single night, feign by craft his form and, boy that you are, don the boy's familiar face, so that when, in the fullness of her joy, amid the royal feast and the flowing wine, Dido takes you to her bosom, embraces you and imprints sweet kisses, you may breathe into her a hidden fire and beguile her with your **venom**.

11B. *Aeneid* 4.514: Dido's priestess uses a *venenum*.

pubentes herbae nigri cum lacte **veneni**

Herbs juicy with the milk of black **venom**

Magic and Catharsis in Theocritus' *Idyll 2* and Vergil's *Aeneid 4*

**12A.** *Aeneid* 4.487–491: The metapoetic abilities of Dido's priestess.

haec se **carminibus** promittit solvere mentes  
quas velit, ast aliis duras immittere curas;  
sistere aquam fluviis et vertere sidera retro;  
nocturnosque movet Manis; mugire videbis                   490  
sub pedibus terram et descendere montibus ornos.

With her **songs** she professes to set free the hearts of whom she wills, but on others to bring cruel love pains; to stay the flow of rivers and turn back the stars; she awakes the ghosts of night; and you will see earth rumbling under your feet and ash trees coming down from mountains.

**12B.** *Aeneid* 4.9–14: Dido is enchanted by Aeneas' song.

Anna soror, quae me suspensam insomnia terrent!  
quis novus hic nostris successit sedibus hospes,  
quem sese ore ferens, quam forti pectore et armis!  
credo equidem, nec vana fides, genus esse deorum.  
degeneres animos timor arguit. heu! quibus ille  
iactatus fatis! **quae bella exhausta canebat!**

Anna, my sister, what dreams thrill me with fears? Who is this stranger guest who has entered our home? How noble his mien! How brave in heart and feats of arms! I believe it well—nor is my confidence vain—that he is sprung from gods. It is fear that proves souls base-born. Alas! by what fates is he vexed! **What wars, long endured, did he sing!**

### Select Bibliography

- Austin, R. G. ed. 1982. *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Quartus*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fairclough, H. R. trans, revised by G. P. Goold. 1999 and 2000. *Virgil*, 2 vols. Loeb Classical Library 63 and 64. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gow, A. S. F. ed. 1952. *Theocritus*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Griffiths, Frederick T. 1979. "Poetry as *Pharmakon* in Theocritus' *Idyll 2*." In *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to Bernard M. Knox on the Occasion of his 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, edited by Glen W. Bowersock, Walter Burkert, and Michael C. J. Putnam, 81–88. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Hopkinson, Neil, ed. and trans. 2015. *Theocritus, Moschus, Bion*. Loeb Classical Library 28. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hunter, Richard, ed. 1999. *Theocritus: A Selection*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mynors, R. A. B. ed. 1969. *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nelis, Damien. 2001. *Vergil's Aeneid and the Argonautica of Apollonius Rhodius*. Leeds: Francis Cairns.
- O'Hara, James J, ed. 2012. "Commentary: *Aeneid 4*." In *Vergil: Aeneid Books 1–6*, edited by Randall T. Ganiban, 323–365. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Segal, Charles. 1985. "Space, Time, and Imagination in Theocritus' Second *Idyll*." *Classical Antiquity* 4 no. 1: 103–119.