

Dido and the Serpent of *Aeneid* V.84-93  
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The sudden appearance of the serpent at Anchises' grave in *Aeneid* V has been variously termed both awe-inspiring and unsettling. Despite the frequently beneficent notion of snakes in Roman thought, the epiphany of the snake bears many associations with other more malevolent serpents in the epic (Putnam 1962). In this paper I argue that this odd ambiguity can be reconciled if we consider this snake as representing the shades of both Anchises and Dido, and indeed Aeneas' own uncertainty concerning the snake's identity invites the reader to decide for himself the creature's true nature.

When Dido curses Aeneas before her suicide, she says that her shade will pursue him (IV.384-387) and she employs imagery connected with avenging Furies (Hardie 1993). She also, in proclaiming her previous benevolence toward Aeneas, asserts that she never "snatched away the ashes and spirit of his father Anchises" (IV.427). This last, usually interpreted as a wildly fanciful and irrelevant fantasy of grave desecration or a reference to an alternate tradition (Raymond 1952), becomes considerably more relevant if we consider that the snake rising from Anchises' grave may actually represent the shade of Dido ascending briefly from the underworld and in a sense invading the sacred space of the tumulus.

The lines in which Vergil describes the mottled coloring of the snake (*ceu nubibus arcus mille iacit varios adverso sole colores*, V.88-89) are taken from the description of Iris' journey to the dying Dido (*mille trahens varios adverso sole colores*, IV.701), and are then recalled by Iris' appearance before the burning of the fleet (*illa viam celerans per mille coloribus arcum*, V.609). It seems that Dido's wish that she had not burned Aeneas' fleet (IV.604-606) is fulfilled during this last episode, and that the ill-will of she and Juno toward Aeneas pervades all three of these episodes, as evidenced by the close verbal parallels, and indeed the fiery gleam of the snake (V.88) recalls both the flames of Dido's pyre and the burning ships. If this snake actually represents the shade of Dido, then her revenge would also include receiving proper funerary rites and games from Aeneas. Furthermore, the connection of the snake with the curse of Dido which eventually culminates in the Punic Wars is perhaps indicated in the tradition first recorded by Cicero (*Div.* I.49) and then Livy (XXI.22) that a mysterious snake urged Hannibal on in a dream to attack Italy. The serpent in *Aeneid* V encircles the tumulus with seven coils, and indeed Hannibal's ultimate goal, as the avenger of Dido, was to surround the Seven Hills of Rome. Indeed the serpent is a symbol of Punic treachery, as well as a proverbially dangerous North African inhabitant and a symbol of resurrection, in this case for purposes of revenge. As in the metaphor of the snake run over by a cart (V.273-279), Dido is pinned to the earth (in the underworld), yet still threatening.

I am not trying to replace the common notion of the snake in *Aeneid* V as a benevolent agent of Anchises, but rather to enrich our understanding of the episode by showing that Vergil may have intended two different interpretations. Frequent references to doubling in the passage (*duo*, *binas*, etc.) increase the sense of ambiguity, and suggest that the snake's identity may lend itself to multiple valid readings.

#### Select Bibliography

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