

Dangerous Marriage Beds in *Aeneid* 6

Entering the Underworld along with Aeneas and the Sibyl in book 6 of the *Aeneid*, we see an assembly of dangerous entities flanking the approach to the palace of Dis. Here, too, are the beds of the avenging Curiae (6. 274) and the iron chambers of the Eumenides (6.280). Both of the words used (*cubile* for the Curiae and *thalamus*, appropriately Greek, for the Eumenides) are commonly associated with the marriage bed, and these references introduce a marriage motif that recurs in the Underworld and is taken up strongly by Juno, goddess of marriage, as she sets in motion the second half of the poem in book 7. The motif then has a final echo in the fatal baldric of Pallas and its scene of a wedding chamber befouled with blood (10.497-499), which spurs Aeneas to the final act of the poem.

This motif is both structurally and thematically important to our readings of the *Aeneid*, but seems to have escaped much scholarly notice. The relationship of Dido and Aeneas, of course, has attracted much attention, and readers have also noted that both the character and (promised) marriage of Lavinia are, despite their centrality to the plot, notable in the lack of narrative focus received. Smolenaars (2004) addresses the scene of Venus soliciting arms from Vulcan, in which we have both a golden *thalamus* (8.372) and a *cubile* (8.412) in the explicit context of marriage, but he is more concerned with Venus' morals than the relevance of the marriage imagery to the rest of the work. Pavlock (1992) points out the negative resonance of the Apollonian allusion in the same scene and also argues that parallels between Silvia's stag and Dido provide a reference to marriage in the immediate provocation of war. Without minimizing the importance of Dido, I suggest that more attention should be paid to marriage as an institution in the *Aeneid*. In the case of the central book 6, the marriage bed appears as a site of punishable crimes and in the context of the Furies, punishers extraordinaire. When Juno takes up the motif

just before summoning Allecto (7.313-322), it is again connected to the idea of punishment and also grounded in Roman marriage ritual.

The first use of *thalamus* in the book is quite explicitly related to marriage (6.93-94): *causa mali tanti coniunx iterum hospita Teucris / externique iterum thalami*. It reappears in the *ferrei thalami* of the Furies (6.280), as mentioned above, and then again at 6.397, referring to the attempted theft of Proserpina by Theseus and Pirithous, which is itself a timely reminder that the queen of the Underworld has a marriage famous for its irregularity. Beginning at line 441, we are shown the *lugentes campi*, home of those dead by love (*durus amor*, 442), and, most especially, Dido, now reunited with her husband. We then see *thalamus* twice (521, 528) in Deiphobus' explanation of his wounds and the role of his *egregia coniunx*. These are the final appearances of the word *thalamus* in book 6, but the way that this passage brings together the marriage bed and death, violations and punishment, sheds light on the use of the term in the context of the Furies in the entrance to the underworld while also anticipating the punishment of related crimes in Tartarus (6.595ff.). First we see Tityos, who tried to have sex with Leto, then Ixion and Pirithous. We met Pirithous earlier as would-be abductor of Proserpina (397), but here he is associated with the Lapiths in another tale of marriage gone spectacularly wrong (601); Ixion, very like Tityos, tried to have sex with Hera. Tityos is tormented by a vulture (597), while a *maxima Furiarum* oversees the punishment of Ixion and Pirithous (605-7).

These crimes are perhaps answered by the parade of heroes promised by Anchises, which would set up an opposition between the glorious and criminal results of sex. The marriage bed in the Underworld, then, is a site for the questions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour that are raised throughout the poem. It also anticipates the use of marriage imagery in book 7, when Juno promises Bellona as *pronuba* for Lavinia. This disturbing promise evokes the Trojan War,

as befits the opening of the Iliadic half of the *Aeneid*, and connects to the imagery of marriage that highlights its role as a powerful, but dangerous, social institution in the Roman context.

Works Cited

Pavlock, B. 1992. "The Hero and the Erotic in *Aeneid* 7-12." *Vergilius* 38: 72-87.

Smolenaars, J. J. L. 2004. "A Disturbing Scene from the Marriage of Venus and Vulcan: *Aeneid* 8.370-415." *Vergilius* 50: 96-107.