

## Female Suicide and Narrative Closure in the *Aeneid*

This paper incorporates studies in archaic Greek oral poetry to analyze how repeated female suicide impacts narrative closure in the *Aeneid*. Scholars have traditionally considered epic to be characterized by a teleological narrative structure (Quint 1993; Kennedy 1997). The *Aeneid* ostensibly complies with this pattern: from the first book of the poem, we are told that Aeneas will succeed in founding the origins of Rome and Jupiter assures Venus that the Romans will acquire an empire (1.278-89). Vergil, however, undermines the validity of Jupiter's claim by embodying a force resistant to his will in two women, Dido and Amata. This force is unleashed through the women's suicides, which present a threat to the stability of Rome as an *imperium sine fine* in their evocation, respectively, of the Punic Wars and the Civil Wars (Genovese 1975; Quint 1993; Giusti 2018). These repeated female suicides unite the two halves of the *Aeneid* by forming a decreasing doublet structure, a technique of closure familiar from Greek oral poetry where a poet repeats an episode found earlier in their poem in diminished scale near the end of their poem (Kelly 2007). This paper builds upon David Quint's recent inquiry into the double meanings of the *Aeneid* (Quint 2018) and considers how Vergil ironically underscores the denial of thematic closure by encasing the women's suicides in a traditional structure of narrative closure.

Analyses of female suicide in the *Aeneid* typically center on Dido and overlook how the two female suicides combine to shape the poem as a whole. Scholars recognize similarities in Vergil's presentation of female suicide: Oliver Lyne notes that, in both episodes, a queen kills herself as the culmination of erotically-charged madness inflicted by a chain of divine succession (Lyne 1987) and Janice Benario notes that Dido and Amata are connected through their shared

description as *furens* (Benario 1970). While useful for understanding the descriptive similarities between the two suicides, these analyses focus on the characterization of Dido and Amata and do not consider the structural significance of repeated female suicide. We can better understand these suicides as forming a decreasing doublet structure. In the *Aeneid*, Dido's suicide is the longer, earlier episode: the description of her madness and its effects occurs over 586 lines (1.615-752 and 4.1-450) and culminates in a suicide that spans 255 lines (4.450-75). By contrast, the description of Amata's madness occurs over 101 lines (7.315-407; 12.54-63) and her suicide only takes up eight lines (12.595-603).

Both Dido and Amata's suicides represent an attempt to undermine the stability of Rome: Dido utters a curse on Rome that scholars interpret as foreshadowing the Punic Wars (Giusti 2018) and Amata attempts to forestall the marriage of Aeneas and Lavinia and hence the foundation of the Romans' predecessors. The repetition of female suicide establishes this subversive force as a continuing threat to Rome and its empire, since it follows Aeneas across the two halves of the *Aeneid* and from Carthage into Latium. Our understanding of the decreasing doublet structure requires us to revise the conception that the *Aeneid* has two distinct "Iliadic" and "Odyssean" halves that switch from a more "romantic" structure of wanderings to a more teleological structure (Quint 1993, Kennedy 1997, Dekel 2012). Because the second episode—Amata's suicide—directs our attention back to the first, the sense of teleology is disrupted. In combination with other acts of narrative subversion (Quint 2018), readers are not able to dismiss anti-Roman sentiment as unique to Dido's situation or to reassure themselves that the problems that arose during Aeneas' wanderings have not followed him to Latium.

## Bibliography

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