

Elegiac *Mors* in Dido's Final Speech (*Aeneid* 4.651–62)

In *Aeneid* 1, Venus' speech to Aeneas underscores Dido's political authority and enterprising rule, emphasizing the queen's active, heroic leadership (1.335–70; Cairns, Putnam). Dido's first address of the Trojan refugees (1.615–30) reveals her agency, diplomacy, and temperance, thereby corroborating Venus' account. After Venus and Cupid infect Dido with *amor* to ensure her benevolent reception of Aeneas and the Trojans (1.657–94), Vergil characterizes her erotic suffering through extensive engagement with elegiac aesthetics and themes. The marked intergeneric character of Dido's appearances in *Aeneid* 1, 4, and 6 has received extensive scholarly treatment, particularly regarding the influence of amatory elegy on Vergil's depiction of her emotional anguish throughout the ill-starred affair (Newton, Cairns, Nelis, Harrison, O'Hara, Horsfall). In this study, I call particular attention to the sepulchral elegiac dimensions of Dido's final speech, which aesthetically reinforce Vergil's vision of *amor* as a lethal force. Through epitaphic language and themes, Dido mournfully commemorates the past exploits of her rule and acknowledges the deleterious impact of her *amor* for Aeneas.

I begin with a brief overview of the conventional elegiac *topoi* that articulate Dido's entire narrative trajectory from amatory anguish to suicide. Dido's amatory symptoms and sepulchral rhetoric, drawn from the realm of the elegiac imaginary, are gravely literalized when she takes her own life. When her *taedium uitae* escalates to suicide, her figurative elegiac wound and passion materialize in her self-inflicted mortal injury (*uulnus*, 4.689) and the flames that consume her corpse (*infelicis Elissae* | ... *flammis*, 5.3–4). I argue that this shift of intergeneric significance underscores the lethal threat posed by Vergil's conception of *amor* in the *Aeneid*.

Thereafter I focus on Dido's final speech (4.651–62), a stunning example of Vergil's extensive use of sepulchral language and motifs to accentuate her trajectory from *amor* to *mors*. I analyze the aesthetic, rhetorical, and thematic elements that derive from funerary inscriptions, arguing that Dido commemorates her forthcoming death by composing her own epitaph and reciting its contents in her last soliloquy. Vergil replicates the perspective and voice of the deceased in speaking inscriptions by composing a first-person speech interwoven with distinct epitaphic expressions and themes (e.g. *uixi et quem dederat cursum Fortuna peregi*, 4.653). Dido reflects on the divine forces that permitted her dalliance with Aeneas (4.561) and controlled the course of her life (4.653), evoking the epitaphic emphasis on the control of divine agents, the fates, and fortune over human existence (Lattimore). When Dido highlights significant achievements from her life, her words reflect the commemorative rhetoric of inscriptions that enumerate the biographical achievements and merits of the deceased.

In the conclusion of Dido's speech, Vergil exploits the sepulchral significance of amatory elegiac elements that previously articulated her amatory suffering (e.g. *infelix, heu*) to associate her last words with the wretchedness of the deceased and the laments of the bereaved. Dido, who once visualized death as an alternative to amatory suffering (e.g. *mortem orat*, 4.451), exhorts herself to die (4.660). Her sentiments synthesize two conventional sepulchral themes: the desire for death; and acquiescence in the face of annihilation. In her conclusion, Dido curses Aeneas to behold and internalize her death (4.661–62). Her last imprecation, evocative of epitaphic maledictions against those who mistreat the deceased during life or after burial, recalls her elaborate curse against Aeneas (4.607–29), which culminates with a prayer for intergenerational war between Carthage and Rome (*imprecor, arma armis*, I pray, arms with arms, 4.629). With the word *mors* (4.662), Dido seals her *nouissima uerba* (4.650) with sepulchral finality.

I conclude by revealing the allusive connection between Dido's final speech and the vivid denouement at the beginning of *Aeneid* 5 (5.1–7). Aeneas, cleaving the waves with the Trojan fleet, gazes back on the *moenia* of Carthage, cited by the suicidal Dido as one of her great achievements (4.655), now shining brightly from the flames of her burning corpse (5.3–4). As he observes this dire light, he fulfills the first curse uttered in her dying words (4.661–62). The second imprecation from Dido's sepulchral soliloquy (4.662) informs the remainder of the intratextual coda (5.4–7).

Works Cited

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