Venus among Poisons: Harmonia's Necklace and the Evils of Seduction

The creation of Harmonia's necklace is described in a brief but striking scene in Book 2 of Statius's *Thebaid*. The episode has not received much attention in scholarship on the *Thebaid*, but the story went on to be central to the *Riss in Mundtuirc*, " a Middle Irish account of a succession of kin-murders that plague the royal houses of antique Thebes and Argos" (Miles 2007, 67). Clarke (2014, 110), in the somewhat different context focused on demons on the battlefield, suggests that, "[f]rom the viewpoint of an early medieval intellectual, one supernatural hostile female is self-evidently akin to another …," and this paper examines the possibility that Venus herself might be considered in that category, especially once she has been associated with monstrous figures like the Furies. Venus in the *Thebaid* has a new and violent role, but the focus of this exploratory paper is on the necklace itself and how it relates to the reception of Statius in the Medieval Ireland and, more generally, to developing imagery of demons and their work.

In the *Thebaid*, Vulcan creates the necklace for the wedding day of Harmonia, daughter of Venus and Mars, after punishment and avenging chains did nothing to their illicit love (2.269-73). When he does so, "he intertwines various plagues and the chief snake plucked from the black hair of Tisiphone, and the most evil force that shows the power of the *cestos*;" (*tum varias pestes raptumque interplicat atro / Tisiphones de crine ducem, et quae pessima ceston / vis probat*;, 2.282-84). Not only is Venus's power placed alongside *varias pestes*, but it is *pessima vis* and the beautiful goddess herself is parallel to the Fury who contributes one of the snakes from her head.

The pain and dangers of love show up in our earlier Greek literature and remain a potent motif to this day, so *pessima vis* is not surprising in itself. The passage also strongly evokes images of witchcraft and love magic, not just with the *cestos*, but with the image of Vulcan artfully combining his ingredients. The necklace itself is a "harmful gift" (dona nocentia, 2.292) and a

"beautiful sin" (decorum / … nefas, 2.294-5), which brings to mind the image of Pandora. It still seems a bit of a shock to have Venus's *cestos* included with one of Tisiphone's snakes among the poisons Vulcan uses, and it is this connection to the monstrous that is particularly striking about the the juxtaposition in the *Thebaid* — Pandora was explicitly an evil for men, but her beauty was precisely the point because it was what made her dangerous. Here, the necklace is beautiful, and it is thus that it seduces its human victims, but its harm comes from the evils that Vulcan worked into it, his wife's power among them. This paper suggests that, in the *Thebaid,* there is a developing image of seduction and seductiveness as not just dangerous, but inherently malevolent and even monstrous, which later interacts with the views of its medieval readers and commentators.

Clarke, Michael. 2014. "Demonology, allegory and translation: the Furies and the Morrígan." In *Classical Literature and Learning in Medieval Irish Narrative*. R. O'Connor, ed. Cambridge.

Miles, Brent. 2007. "*Riss in Mundtuirc*: The Tale of Harmonia's Necklace and the Study of the Theban Cycle in Medieval Ireland." *Ériu* 57: 67-112.