

Dido's Curse of Aeneas and the Lex Talionis

I will argue that Vergil constructed Dido's curse on Aeneas (4.589-629) carefully and intricately; that her curse of Aeneas is a carefully measured response to his betrayal; and that her speech holds a central place in the epic that is established through specific linkages to several literary, historical, and details. Early in the poem, Vergil carefully assimilates Aeneas and Dido through parallel traits and experiences, and later weaves strands of those parallels into her venomous curse. I will present her speech in three segments, noting prominent features that link the curse to other portions of the poem. In the first section, 589-599, a focus on *fides* dominates, along with important verbal resonances; in the second, 600-612, through Dido's references to mythic figures and tragic tales, Vergil deepens her complex characterization; in the third, the elements of the curse itself (612-629) include verbal echoes, intertextual and historical references, and linguistic and metrical play. These elements, combined, constitute a passage of compelling force (Austin claims that this speech "must surely rank with the most magnificent of any poet in any language," *ad* 590). Within the text, it functions like a hinge linking the past with the future, myth with history, epic with tragedy, and turns on an axis of love and enmity.

Focusing on the final section of Dido's speech – the curse itself – I will show how Dido's experiences are what give this curse its biting venom, and that much in her curse looks both backward and forward. She has known well the feelings of betrayal and loss, when her brother murdered her husband; she knows what it is like to be warned by the ghost of her loved one, that she is in danger and needs to leave her home, under cover of night, to flee for safety; she has experienced the heartache of exile and led her followers capably to a new home; she knows how it feels to be surrounded by hostile peoples. Thus, many elements of her curse, though appearing prophetic from the perspective of Vergil's audience, are grounded in the

suffering she personally has experienced; she wants Aeneas to feel the pain that she has suffered, in more ways than one.

Dido's actual curse on Aeneas reflects the philosophy behind the *lex talionis* – “an eye for an eye. Here are a few examples. In her wish that “he be harangued by the weapons and war of a bold nation” (615), Dido reflects a circumstance in which she found herself in Carthage, as she and Anna discuss at the start of book 4 (39-44). Dido, having experienced an unsettling existence, surrounded by hostile peoples, wishes this for Aeneas. Likewise, *finibus extorris*, “exiled from his territory”, evokes her experience of being an exile herself; despite the fact that Aeneas is still in this condition, she seeks to impose it on him again. *Complexu avulsus Iuli*, “wrenched from Iulus' embrace”, is manifold with meaning. Most directly, it means “torn from one you love.” Dido's loss of her husband Sychaeus was devastating, and from her perspective, since Aeneas has already lost Creusa, losing Iulus would be the most devastating loss he could now experience. But it also reflects her own sense of being wrenched from Aeneas' embrace. Thus, her wish that Aeneas endure this loss represents her desire that he feel the same kind of loss and devastation that she has felt, an isolation that can be brought on only by the loss of a singular beloved family member. The remainder of her curse will be examined in a similar manner, with attention to details, parallels to Dido's own experiences, and verbal linkages to other segments of the *Aeneid*.

Many scholars view Dido as a woman wronged and emotionally unhinged, and some appear to lack sympathy for her plight. But, as Highet remarks, “A queen cannot be taken and then cast away. Not to have avenged herself on the man who outraged her womanhood and her pride is unforgivable.” (181) I hope to demonstrate that, although she is emotionally distraught, Dido's curse of Aeneas lies both within reasonable limits (as the *lex talionis* would dictate) and is thus indicative of her rational state, for genuine revenge is obtained not through

haphazardly emotional reactions, but through considered and measured response. Finally, I will show how her curse, through the strong verbal connections it contains to other parts of the poem, holds a central position to the whole of the epic.

Bibliography

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