

Magic and Catharsis in Theocritus' *Idyll* 2 and Vergil's *Aeneid* 4

The ritual Dido performs with the Ethiopian priestess in *Aeneid* 4.504–521 is one of the more confusing scenes of that book, as it seems to have no effect on its outcome. While scholars have suggested that the performance of this ritual serves to perpetuate Dido's deceit of her sister Anna (Pease 1935; Austin 1982), I argue that, in the scenes that follow, Anna seems entirely unaware of (or at least unaffected by) the ritual. In fact, the entire ritual could be excised with no effect on the rest of the book. If it neither furthers Dido's deception nor has any lasting impact on the plot of the book, there must be another reason for its inclusion.

Commentators often connect Dido's ritual to Apollonius' *Medea* (Pease 1935; Collard 1975). While *Medea* is obviously a significant intertext throughout *Aeneid* 4, I argue that the ritual Dido performs with the Ethiopian priestess looks back not just to *Medea*, but more importantly to Theocritus' *Simaetha* (*Idyll* 2), an allusion previously recognized (Austin 1982; O'Hara 2012) but whose significance has been overlooked. The basic plot of *Simaetha*'s story shares obvious similarities with Dido's relationship with Aeneas, and Vergil strengthens this allusion through a number of clear intertextual and thematic references. By relating Dido to *Simaetha*, Vergil engages with the bucolic poet's discussion of φάρμακα. Ultimately, Vergil uses the connection between *Simaetha* and Dido to emphasize the calamity of Dido's infatuation with Aeneas and the futility of her attempts to cure her lovesickness.

Idyll 2 begins with *Simaetha*'s magical ritual aimed at Delphis, followed by the story of their previous relationship. Scholars often note the inefficacy of *Simaetha*'s magic (Segal 1973), but the language demonstrates not only that it fails but also that its effects are reversed: it is actually Delphis who does the enchanting. *Simaetha* attempts to “melt” or “burn” Delphis

(τάκεται, 18; αἶθω, 24; θυσῶ, 33), but it is she who “melts” (ἐτάκετο, 83) and “burns” (καταίθομαι, 40). While the magic may fail, the performance of song itself may function as a catharsis entirely separate from the intended outcome of the magic. As Theocritus states in *Idyll* 11, there is no other cure (φάρμακον) for love than poetry (1–3). The interpretation that Simaetha is cured by the act of singing hinges upon one of her concluding statements: ἐγὼ δ’ οἰσῶ τὸν ἐμὸν πόθον ὥσπερ ὑπέστην (“I will bear my desire as I have endured,” 164). Some scholars interpret this line positively (Griffiths 1979), while others understand it as the continuation of her pain (Segal 1985). Ultimately, Theocritus’ language of Simaetha’s “endurance” is ambiguous.

Dido’s ritual parallels the reversal of Simaetha’s magic: it is actually Aeneas who does the enchanting. Vergil draws on the metapoetic connotations of magic to demonstrate that Dido has already experienced what she attempts to inflict upon Aeneas. For, while the Ethiopian priestess uses *carmina* (4.487) against Aeneas, it is Aeneas’ song throughout books 2 and 3 that enflames Dido’s passion. In her infatuation, Dido mentions, above all, Aeneas’ story: *quae bella exhausta canebat* (“he sang of such draining wars,” 4.14). Through *canebat*, Vergil strengthens the metapoetic undertones of Dido’s infatuation.

While the effects of magic and song are separate for Simaetha, Vergil’s metapoetic vocabulary blurs the two. Vergil, therefore, replicates the reversal of the magical effects seen in *Idyll* 2, but his special emphasis on Aeneas’ enchantment of Dido through song eliminates the potential catharsis of Dido’s ritual. I argue that, by calling attention to Theocritus’ discussion of φάρμακα, Vergil shows that Dido’s lovesickness is no ordinary one. While a φάρμακον may offer a cure for Simaetha, a φάρμακον causes Dido’s illness. For Cupid poisons Dido with a *uenenum* (*Aen.* 1.688), the Latin equivalent of the Greek φάρμακον. Simaetha can turn to song in

the hope of “enduring” her pain, but Dido has no such recourse or ambiguity. It is precisely the *carmen* that infects her.

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