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The Allusive Triangle of Dido's Suicide

The tragedy of Dido is an old chestnut of Virgilian criticism. Vergil himself explicitly compares Dido at 4.469-473 to Orestes and Pentheus, not as mythological figures, but as characters on the stage, and the overall structure of the Book has been analyzed as a tragedy along Aristotelian lines. Much attention has also been devoted to sustained allusions Vergil makes to the character of Medea: falling in love with Aeneas, Dido is likened to the young Medea of Apollonius; in the bitter exchange of speeches with Aeneas, and her turn to magic in despair, she is linked to the older and resentful Medea of Euripides. In this paper I will explore Dido's relationship to another unexpected Euripidean character, the Corinthian princess who burns and melts by Medea's design. I will argue that this Euripidean connection sheds new light on two important episodes, the gift-giving scene in Book one and Dido's suicide in Book 4, and helps us explain why Cupid does not inspire Dido's love for Aeneas by shooting her with an arrow.

The textual focus of my analysis is on the parallels between the episodes of gift-giving in the *Medea* and in Book I of the *Aeneid*. In both cases, gifts that could belong to bride's attire, and thus carry connotations of wedding gifts are given to a woman who in fact occupies the bride's functional position in the story. The gifts are presented through the giver's children (Medea's sons and Cupid in the guise of Ascanius), whose safety and ability to remain in the land under the recipient's control are in question. In addition, one of the gifts in each case acknowledges the recipient's royal status. More striking still, the combined effect of the gifts and Cupid's touch on Dido is reminiscent of the action of Medea's poison on the princess. Vergil's use of *venenum* at 1.688 in Venus' description of Cupid's intended influence on Dido and *haerere* at 1.717 in the portrayal of the physical contact between Dido and Cupid (cf. Creon's inability to detach himself from his daughter's corpse because the poisoned robe clings to him) is particularly significant. Unlike the simultaneous allusion to young Medea's falling in love with Jason in Apollonius, the allusion to the princess' fiery death combines with the poet's more explicit indications of the doomed fate of the union to which this scene will lead. Alongside the correspondences in the act of gift-giving and the nature of the gifts, the repeated references to the *doli* of Venus and Cupid highlight their kinship with the scheming *Medea*, thus emphasizing the hostility of their intentions and contributing to the foreshadowing of the tragic outcome.

The effect of the triangulated allusions to Medea and the princess is a highly complex portrayal of Dido. She is both a helpless victim and a figure of heroic stature in control of her own fate. The two sides of this depiction culminate in Dido's suicide at the end of Book 4: like the princess, she is consumed by fire; like Medea, she is the one who wields the sword. The desire on Vergil's part to maintain both allusive threads until the end may also account for the apparent inconsistency in the description of the suicide, in that the pyre appears to be burning and not burning at the same time. In the end, the identity of the agent and the victim, created through allusions to the *Medea*, expresses itself perfectly in the act of suicide.