

In *Aeneid* 1 Venus chooses Ascanius as the form Cupid should take, when he inflames Dido with desire for Aeneas. Her choice of disguise for Cupid is no accident, since Ascanius too plays an unrecognized role in facilitating desire and passion. He does this as a recipient of gifts and as a gift himself. In this paper, I will demonstrate that, although generally treated as an incidental player, Ascanius is a very critical focus of desire. This is the case, because the gift is the place where desire is displaced and passed on, by both giver and recipient; it is the place of commerce in desire; it is the screen where desire of the giver and, at times, the recipient, is projected. As such, Ascanius not only facilitates the desires of Dido, Andromache, Aeneas and Venus, but the desire of the Trojans for Rome, as well.

As a recipient of gifts, Ascanius offers a screen, upon which others project their true desires. Andromache bestows gifts upon him as *monimenta* of her love for Hector and calls him to bear witness to this love (3.486-7). At the time she addresses him in terms of her son, Astyanax (3.489), regarding Ascanius, not for himself, but for the image of her son she perceives in him. During the funeral games in *Aeneid* 5, Ascanius rides a horse given to him by Dido, described as a *monimentum* and *pignus amoris* (5.572). This gift, too, is not Dido's pledge of love for Ascanius, but for Aeneas, her true object of desire. In *Aeneid* 4 Dido embraces Ascanius in a futile attempt to deceive her passion with the image of Aeneas found in Ascanius (4.84-5). In both cases, Ascanius is the site of displaced desire for Dido and Andromache.

Ascanius is also a gift himself, bearing the intentions of the giver to the recipient. Gifts are used to ingratiate, appease, persuade, and bind. Ascanius can be seen performing all these functions. For instance, Venus anticipates Dido will embrace Ascanius, therefore he is a suitable form for Cupid to assume for his mission. Cupid, once he has taken on the form of Ascanius, is paired with other gifts. In this way he is a gift to Dido from Venus. Because Aeneas has summoned and is presenting Ascanius, then Cupid is also a gift from Aeneas. Part of a gift's value is the spirit, with which it is imbued, that is, what the giver intends or what the recipient reads into it. The spirit that Ascanius' image is literally imbued with is Cupid. Whatever Aeneas' intentions are in presenting Ascanius to Dido, they have been trumped by Venus' intentions and substitution of Cupid. Thus conflated, Ascanius becomes a gift from Aeneas, with the intent of binding Dido to Aeneas, and the bond is disastrously secure, both when Dido wishes that Aeneas had left behind a little Ascanius (4.328-9) and when she imagines breaking the bond by offering Ascanius up as a dinner (strange gift) for Aeneas (4.602).

As a gift, Ascanius has desire and intention imposed on him for the purposes of transference; therefore, in this sense, he is a gift to the Trojans, as well. Invoked by Zeus, Mercury, and Aeneas himself as the reason for seeking Hesperia, Ascanius is the vehicle bearing Aeneas, the Trojans, and all their desires to their new homeland. In word, he is the one on whose behalf Rome is being sought; but in fact, he is their hope of reaching Rome. As a child, Ascanius is particularly well suited to having desires projected upon him and transferred forward or into the future. Because he is the natural heir to Aeneas' legacy, he is the focal point for the desires for Rome held by Aeneas and his men.