

# A LOCK AND A PROMISE: MYTH AND ALLUSION IN AENEAS' FAREWELL TO DIDO IN AENEID 6

R. A. SMITH

IN HIS FINAL FAREWELL to Dido in the underworld, Aeneas speaks not merely as the hero of the poem, or even as the hero of a Herculean katabasis, but as a learned, Alexandrian poet. Indeed, there has been much discussion of the allusion to Catullus' *invita, o regina, tuo de vertice cessi* (66.39), that occurs in Aeneas' mouth as he addresses the queen in the underworld (*Aen.* 6.456-466):<sup>1</sup>

*infelix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo  
venerat exstinctam ferroque extrema secutam?  
funeris heu tibi causa fui? per sidera iuro,  
per superos et si qua fides tellure sub ima est,  
invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi.  
sed me iussa deum, quae nunc has ire per umbras,  
per loca senta situ cogunt noctemque profundam,  
imperii egere suis; nec credere quivi  
hunc tantum tibi me discessu ferre dolorem.  
siste gradum teque aspectu ne subtrahe nostro.  
quem fugis? extremum fato quod te adloquor hoc est.*<sup>2</sup>

The following works will be cited by author's name alone: R. G. Austin, *P. Vergili Maronis: Aeneidos Liber Quartus* (Oxford 1955); Susan Skulsky, " 'Invitus, Regina': Aeneas and the Love of Rome," *AJP* 106 (1985) 447-455; James Tatum, "Allusion and Interpretation in *Aeneid* 6.440-476," *AJP* 105 (1984) 434-452; R. D. Williams, *The Aeneid of Virgil: Books 1-6* (Glasgow 1972).

<sup>1</sup>Recently Patricia Johnston, "Dido, Berenice and Arsinoe: *Aeneid* 6.460," *AJP* 108 (1987) 649-654, has stressed the implications of the Callimachean tone of this passage, revealing that the persona of Dido is suggestive of a number of plausible associations, including, as the title implies, Arsinoe, Berenice and Cleopatra; Skulsky proposes that the incongruity of this allusion "distances us from the hero whose grief has begun to elicit a measure of sympathy," removing the reader to a "more objective vantage point," so as "to temper this sympathy with a consideration of the dehumanizing effect of Aeneas' political success" (454). Other discussions of the allusion to Catullus include Tatum; Gian Biagio Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, ed. Ch. Segal (Ithaca 1986) 88-90; M. Skinner, "The Last Encounter of Dido and Aeneas: *Aen.* 650-476," *Vergilius* 29 (1983) 12-18, esp. p. 18, n. 12; A. H. F. Thornton, "A Catullan Quotation in Virgil's *Aeneid* Book VI," *AUMLA* 17 (1962) 77-79.

<sup>2</sup>The texts cited are the following: for the *Aeneid*, the OCT of R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford 1969); for Euripides' *Alcestis*, the text of A. M. Dale, *Euripides: Alcestis* (Oxford 1954); for Catullus, the OCT of R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford 1958).

It will be argued here that, in considering Aeneas' words, one will see that the allusion to Catullus, though it culminates at line 460, is somewhat more extensive and it is important to consider not simply the words of this allusion, but the entire context in order to come to grips adequately with this poetic reference. After the specific implications of the allusion in this context have been considered, the more general connotation of the reference to the lock in light of the mythical association of Aeneas and Dido with the Alcestis myth will be discussed, for ancient commentators have noticed that the reference to a lock casts Aeneas' speech here against the general backdrop of that tale. It will be argued that Virgil's clever association of his characters with characters in that myth, an association which is in part suggested by the allusion to Catullus, calls into doubt the success of at least one aspect of Aeneas' mission to the underworld.

#### THE CONTEXT OF THE ALLUSION

The Catullan passage on which verse 460 is modeled is, of course, that of the lock's swearing to Berenice that unwillingly did it yield to the blade (66.39-42):

*invita, o regina, tuo de vertice cessi,  
invita: adiuro teque tuumque caput,  
digna ferat quod si quis inaniter adiuravit:  
sed qui se ferro postulet esse parem?*

There have been several discussions of this line and James Tatum has rightly shown that this allusion should be connected with the cutting of Dido's lock by Iris in *Aeneid* 4.<sup>3</sup> But beyond Tatum's apt assessment, it should be pointed out that in the Catullan passage the lock not only swears to the queen, but pronounces a curse (41) and poses a question (42) that, when considered in conjunction with the near repetition of verse 39 in Virgil's text, may have implications for Aeneas and his mission. But, while the language that Aeneas uses to swear to Dido in the underworld invokes this section of the Catullan poem, I do not believe it likely, as some have suggested,<sup>4</sup> that Virgil therefore would wish to identify Aeneas playfully with a lock of hair. Surely, rather, the association with the lock creates a generally funereal atmosphere for this portion of the text and perhaps recalls the specific pronouncement of the curse by the lock of Berenice on the one who swears vainly.

To establish the connection with the specifics of the lock's curse, Virgil cleverly places in Aeneas' short speech two elements that occur in the curse

<sup>3</sup>Tatum 440-444.

<sup>4</sup>Skulsky 447-448; conversely, Williams 488 *ad loc.*, has difficulty believing that Virgil deploys a line from a comic context here.

itself, aside from the near verbatim citation of Catullus 66.39. First, one will notice that Aeneas opens his speech to Dido by asking her if she had really killed herself with a sword (457). This, of course, pathetically reveals that, though the reader knows, Aeneas is still uncertain as to how Dido had killed herself. Aeneas' speech here, as Feeney has shown about his private speech in general, shows his ignorance about her death and reveals his human weakness.<sup>5</sup> Inspection of the Catullan passage reveals that Berenice's lock, too, refers to just such an instrument when raising the question: "who can claim to be as strong as a sword?" (42). When Virgil has Aeneas ask Dido "was the message true that you pursued desperate measures with a sword?" (6.456-457) within three lines of the more pointed allusion to the Catullan passage, he suggests that the context of that passage must be brought to bear on his own.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, one will notice that the lock speaks specifically of the victim of the curse getting the just deserts of swearing falsely (*digna ferat*, 41). As Aeneas apologizes to Dido, he points out that he could not believe the rumor that by departing he had brought her such grief (*ferre dolorem*, 464). Now *ferre*, it might be argued, is a common enough verb and it should be no surprise to find it in Aeneas' mouth in this context. True enough, nor should one fail to observe that the use of *ferre* in the Catullan passage where it means "bear or endure" and in the Virgilian passage where it means "bring" is not strictly parallel. Yet, in conjunction with the powerful allusion at 460 and the reference to the sword that immediately precedes it (456 f.), the possibility of paronomasia should not be ruled out too quickly.

Accordingly, it seems possible that the allusion at 460, which might otherwise seem out of place in the Virgilian passage of high pathos, invokes the earlier Catullan role of the lock, but specifically a lock that (a) pronounced a curse on the one who would swear falsely and (b) in that very context made mention of a sword. In the case of the lock, of course, it is the blade which removed it from the queen's head, but in the new, Virgilian context, the image of the sword has deeper meaning, for it is the instrument of death by which Dido has killed herself. The curse and the sword, however, rather than being associated with Aeneas, the character that swears here and who is, within the heroic milieu, equal to the sword, fall instead upon Dido. Berenice's lock prays that the one who swears falsely pay the penalty. Yet it is Aeneas who swears here and it is specifically not Aeneas who bears grief as a penalty, but rather brings grief to Dido. Moreover it is not Aeneas who yields to the sword, but Dido who does. Dido, then, is a

<sup>5</sup>D. C. Feeney "The Taciturnity of Aeneas," *CQ* NS 33 (1983) 204-219, at 217.

<sup>6</sup>For a similar connection based on *ferro* between Lucan *Bell. Civ.* 2.315 f. and *Aen.* 9.493 f., cf. Philip Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition* (Cambridge 1993) 49.

"negative" response to the question that Berenice's lock raises. Who, then, can claim to be a match for a sword? Certainly, pathetically, not Dido.

Accordingly, it might seem at first blush that Virgil has reversed the outworking of the curse on the perjurer and has offered a surprising answer to the rhetorical question. Dido's tacit response suggests that it is surely Aeneas who is presented here as the one who has broken his pledge, and therefore he should be the one who merits the curse of the lock; but he is exonerated from it, and instead the recipient of his broken vow absorbs it, she who suffered grief at her lover's departure.

There is, moreover, one further reason why the allusion to Catullus 66 is not out of place, but apt, in the context of Aeneas' address to Dido. Dido, of course, is an African queen, like Berenice.<sup>7</sup> As the lock is removed from the latter queen by the blade, so the Virgilian hero has been removed from queen Dido by a sword, which, one will not fail to recall, is in fact that of Aeneas himself.

#### THE MYTHICAL ASSOCIATIONS OF THE LOCK

On a general level, moreover, we have noted that Virgil's allusion to a lock is entirely suited to a funereal context such as we have in *Aeneid* 6 where the hero encounters in the underworld the shade of the dead queen. The cutting of the lock has most often been explained as stemming from the belief that Proserpina claimed for herself a lock of those who die before their appointed time, a natural enough inference from the text which specifically states as much (*Aen.* 4.696-699).<sup>8</sup> Although Dido commits suicide, in the end she does not yield to death without a struggle. After the heroine has mortally wounded herself, Juno sends Iris from Olympus "to loose her struggling soul and close-locked limbs."<sup>9</sup> Commentators on this passage have not failed to call attention to Macrobius' remark that the cutting of the lock itself is not a Virgilian invention,<sup>10</sup> but goes back to Euripides' *Alcestis*, where Thanatos boasts to Apollo of his power (72-76):

πάλλ' ἂν σὺ λέξας οὐδὲν ἂν πλεον λάβοις·  
ἢ δ' οὖν γυνή κάτεισιν εἰς Ἅιδου δόμους.  
στείχω δ' ἐπ' αὐτήν, ὥς κατάρξωμαι ξίφει·

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Johnston (above, n. 1) 652 f.

<sup>8</sup>*Aen.* 4.696-699: *nam quia nec fato merita nec morte peribat, / sed misera ante diem subitoque accensa furore, / nondum illi flavum Proserpina vertice crinem / abstulerat Stygioque caput damnaverat Orco.* Commentators on this passage are correct to point out that lines 696-697 emphasize the fact that Dido's death was self-chosen (Williams 393 *ad loc.*) and that the very moment of her death (704-705) is like that of Lausus (*Aen.* 10.819-820) or Turnus (*Aen.* 12.951-952; see Austin 202 *ad* 4.705).

<sup>9</sup>Translation is that of Austin 200 *ad* 4.695.

<sup>10</sup>Austin 200-201 *ad* 4.698; Williams 393 *ad* 698-699; Macrobius *Sat.* 5.19.2; Servius, *ad* 3.46; 4.703; see also Dale (above, n. 2) 57-58 *ad* 74-76.

ἱερὸς γὰρ οὗτος τῶν κατὰ χθονὸς θεῶν  
 οὗτος τόδ' ἔγχος κρατὺς ἀγνίστη τρίχια.

Servius, too, calls attention to the association with Euripides (*ad Aen.* 4.694) and John Rauk has recently taken up Servius' observation, seeing in the Virgilian passage a deliberate comparison of Dido with the character of Alcestis whom we know best from Euripides' play.<sup>11</sup> Regarding these two figures, Rauk states that "the contrasts are deep and resonant. Alcestis, the perfect wife, dies in order to save her husband; Dido dies in order to destroy hers. Alcestis, in the end, is redeemed, and the value of her marriage and self-sacrifice is reaffirmed. Dido does not return from the underworld, and her reunion with Aeneas there is a bitter reaffirmation of the alienation that is her fate."<sup>12</sup>

Rauk is surely correct to call attention to the contrast between Dido and Alcestis, rightly drawing the conclusion that by virtue of the cutting of the lock, Dido is prefigured by Alcestis. Yet Aeneas does not fit very well into this schema as an Admetus figure, as Rauk implies by contrasting the husbands of Dido and Alcestis. Rather, just as Dido is a kind of Alcestis, Aeneas clearly links himself with another character from the same myth. When he justifies his request for the *katabasis*, Aeneas reminds the Sibyl that he will not be the first hero to have made this journey (*Aen.* 6.119–123):

*si potuit manis accersere coniugis Orpheus  
 Threicia fretus cithara fidibusque canoris,  
 si fratrem Pollux alterna morte redemit  
 itque reditque uiam totiens. quid Thesea, magnum  
 quid memorem Alciden?*

While it is fitting that Aeneas mentions Theseus, whose relationship with Ariadne (e.g., in *Cat.* 64) is often cited as a model for that of Dido and Aeneas,<sup>13</sup> it is more fitting that Aeneas identifies himself with Hercules here, especially in light of the themes of *katabasis* and restoration (i.e., Dido and Sychaeus) that are a part of this story. Indeed, this is not the only time that Aeneas identifies himself with Hercules.<sup>14</sup> Another example might be taken from Book 2, when Aeneas portrays his actions during the fall of Troy:

<sup>11</sup>John Rauk, "The Cutting of Dido's Lock, *Aeneid* Book Four, 696–699," *AAPhA* (Atlanta 1991) 52.

<sup>12</sup>Rauk (above, n. 11) 52.

<sup>13</sup>See Gordon Williams, *Technique and Ideas in the Aeneid* (Yale 1983) 84; also Richard C. Monti, *The Dido Episode and the Aeneid* (Leiden 1981) 102–103, n. 1.

<sup>14</sup>Among others, see V. Buchheit, *Vergil über die Sendung Roms. Untersuchungen zum Bellum Poenicum und zur Aeneis* (Heidelberg 1963, *Gymnasium Beihefte* 3) 116–132; G. Karl Galinsky, "The Hercules-Cacus Episode in *Aeneid* VIII," *AJP* 87 (1966) 18–51; cf. also Galinsky's *The Herakles Theme. The Adaptation of the Hero in Literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century* (Oxford 1972) 126–152; also, W. S.

*haec fatus latos umeros subiectaque colla / veste super fulvique insternor pelle leonis* (*Aen.* 2.721–722).<sup>15</sup> Throughout the *Aeneid*, the identification of Aeneas and Hercules is maintained. To take one further example, when Aeneas sets out against Turnus, he again comports himself in an overtly Herculean manner (8.552–553):<sup>16</sup>

*ducunt exsortem Aeneae, quem fulva leonis  
pellis obit totum praefulgens unguibus aureis.*

It is this Aeneas who time and again explicitly identifies himself with Hercules,<sup>17</sup> that makes his descent into the underworld not only as a second Odysseus, but emblematic of a wider heroic tradition that includes Hercules. And Aeneas is now the central focus of this tradition.

When Aeneas greets Dido in the underworld, however, it is not as a Hercules figure but, as we saw above, as an Alexandrian poet that he speaks: *invitus, regina, tuo de litore cessi* (6.460). In having Aeneas allude to Berenice's lock here, Virgil evokes the association of the funereal lock of Dido at the close of Book 4,<sup>18</sup> where the removal of the lock by Iris from the head of the heroine parallels Aeneas' departure from Carthage that caused Dido's death. Now in the underworld he finally realizes the impact of his leaving and, by alluding to the lock's catasterism, he both anticipates the future "stardom" of his own family<sup>19</sup> and pathetically reminds us that his very departure, which symbolically recalls the offering of the lock to Proserpina, spelled doom for the queen.

The poignancy of this passage lies also in the association of the lock with Alcestis. Unlike Alcestis, who, though she was restored to life, remains a shadowier figure in literature, Dido has been given a strong personality and here takes the opportunity to respond powerfully, if tacitly, to Aeneas (*illa solo fixos oculos auersa tenebat*, *Aen.* 6.469). At the end of Euripides' *Alcestis* the heroine does not speak (*Alcestis* 1143). The dialogue presented there is exclusively that of the males, husband and hero;<sup>20</sup> in *Aen.* 6, it is

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Anderson, *The Art of the Aeneid* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1969) 71–72; cf. also Hardie (above, n. 6) 66.

<sup>15</sup>G. Karl Galinsky, *Aeneas, Sicily, and Rome* (Princeton 1969) 21–22.

<sup>16</sup>Galinsky (above, n. 14) 22.

<sup>17</sup>Whether verbally as at *Aen.* 2.721–722, or by donning the lion skin, as he does here.

<sup>18</sup>Tatum 444.

<sup>19</sup>One will recall that Aeneas' descendant Julius Caesar, whose death will be marked by an astronomical phenomenon, will become a god and have his own constellation (cf. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 15.745–870, esp. 849–851; Virgil *Aen.* 10.680–681; *Ecl.* 9.47–49; Horace *Odes* 1.12.45–48). Cf. Skulsky 453.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Charles Segal, "Euripides' *Alcestis*: Female Death and Male Tears," *CA* 11 (1992) 142–158, at 155: "The play is called *Alcestis*, but the real concern is male rather than female experience. *Alcestis* is there as the object of loss, but also as a problem: she displays and embodies a heroism that Admetus himself cannot reach." The same might be said of Dido and Aeneas in this scene.

the hero, who had once quietly slipped away from Dido (*Aen.* 4.571 ff.), that does all the talking.<sup>21</sup> And whereas Euripides' heroine could not speak because of ritual purification (*Alcestis* 1144, though her very silence does not jar with that joyous occasion, cf. 1153–1158), Dido, by her statue-like silence,<sup>22</sup> reveals the depth of her own pain and assigns to Aeneas the blame for her death.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, in *Aen.* 6 it is by his "failure" as Hercules that Aeneas effects the successful restoration of Dido not to life, but to her husband Sychaeus by whom she is accompanied in the underworld. The outcome is comparable to *Alcestis*' being restored to Admetus, but Virgil's adaptation of the mythical backdrop calls into question, in a sense, the success of Aeneas' "mission" in Book 6. Moreover, if we consider the other figures who made katabases that he compares himself with in this same book, he is not wholly successful either. Though, as we saw,<sup>24</sup> he had suggested as much, he is not really another Orpheus, who might have rescued his wife by his song.<sup>25</sup> Nor does he, like Castor, at least half-succeed in his rescue attempt by trading places, nor, like Theseus, does he make a bold foray to defy Death and ultimately to attempt to retrieve a woman. The fact that each of these characters had specifically gone to the underworld on some sort of mission of rescue or retrieval contrasts with Aeneas, who has not come to restore Dido to life, even though, by his departure in Book 4, he has ironically restored her to her husband. We see then that Aeneas is an inferior Orpheus, a lack-luster Hercules, and his very words, via the allusion to the lock, evoke the association of Dido with *Alcestis* and pointedly call attention to his failure as a hero in this aspect of his mission to the underworld.

#### CONCLUSION

To sum up. A specific association of the lock with Aeneas, we have seen, is appropriate, for it (1) heightens the pathos of the current situation because the context of the allusion contains a curse which sadly falls not on the swearing party, but on the victim of what she perceives as a broken

<sup>21</sup>Further on Aeneas' speaking generally, cf. Feeney (above, n. 5).

<sup>22</sup>Cf. *Aen.* 1.482.

<sup>23</sup>Here we have a multiple layering of allusion: on the one hand, that of Catullus and Callimachus, on the other, Euripides. This kind of depth of allusion is typical of Hellenistic poetry; cf. Wendell Clausen, *Virgil's Aeneid and the Tradition of Hellenistic Poetry* (Berkeley 1987) 20; also Richard Thomas, "Virgil's *Georgics* and the Art of Reference," *HSCP* 90 (1986) 171–198, at 188 f.

<sup>24</sup>*Aen.* 6.119–120, cited above, 309.

<sup>25</sup>Aeneas does not attempt to rescue Dido or Creusa; it is perhaps interesting to note at this point that it is well known that Creusa was elsewhere (e.g., in Ennius) called Eurydice; for a full discussion cf. Austin 296–289, ad 795. One will not fail to recall that the tragic parting of Aeneas and Creusa described at the close of *Aen.* 2 (790–794) echoes verbally *G.* 4.499–503, the parting of Eurydice and Orpheus, who did at least attempt to rescue his wife.

pledge (*Aen.* 4.172),<sup>26</sup> (2) suggestively answers the lock's rhetorical question *qui se ferro postulet esse parem?* both positively (ultimately Aeneas might make such a vaunt) and negatively (sadly Dido could not), and (3) both the lock and the hero are parted from their queens by the sword. The language of Aeneas' speech—particularly the citation at 460, but also the clever reuse of *ferre* and *ferro*—suggests these associations and calls the reader to consider, not to dismiss, the Catullan context.

But the general association of the lock that the allusion provides also evokes the myth of Alcestis and Admetus, as we have it recorded in Euripides' play. The association of Aeneas with Hercules, sustained throughout the poem but brought to the fore in *Aen.* 6.123, together with the motifs of katabasis and restoration (Dido and Sychaeus), should bring to memory, as they did for Macrobius and Servius, the association of Dido with Alcestis. Both Dido and Alcestis are silent in their final scenes (cf. *Alcestis* 1143), both women are last seen in the presence of their former husband and the one who restored them to him. And, we are not allowed to forget, it is as a Hercules figure that Aeneas has made his descent into the underworld (6.123).

But while this aspect of the outcome of both tales is the same, Virgil's reshaping of the material might be viewed as calling into question the "success" of the reunion of husband and wife, even as Aeneas' successful killing of Turnus in *Aen.* 12 might be regarded as a challenge to the validity of the Augustan realm that ultimately is created by it, for Aeneas seemingly succumbs to the very *furor* that his new kind of heroism might have supplanted.<sup>27</sup> Indeed one must consider the enigmatic reference to the lock not only in light of the context of the Catullan passage and vis-à-vis the Euripidean associations, but in light of the development of the hero's character elsewhere in the poem. Aeneas' "failure" both in the underworld and on the battlefield results, in some senses, in a successful outcome, but success, one might ask, achieved at what cost?<sup>28</sup>

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS  
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY  
NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ 08903

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Gordon Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford 1968) 381–382.

<sup>27</sup>*Contra* Karl Galinsky, "The Anger of Aeneas," *AJP* 109 (1988) 321–348; cf. Michael C. J. Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid* (Cambridge, Mass. 1965) 193.

<sup>28</sup>I would like to thank Lowell Edmunds and the anonymous reviewers of *Phoenix* for their comments and suggestions.