

Venereal Disease and the Ox-Eyed Goddess: Valerius Flaccus's Venus and Juno as Vergilian Vectors of Disease

This paper examines the parallelism, in Valerius's *Argonautica*, of the pairs Venus and Fama (Lemnos episode, Bk.2) and Juno and Tisiphone (Io-epyllion, Bk.4), and the connecting bridge of Juno and Dryope (Hylas episode, Bk.3). I argue that Valerius intensifies the disease element of the traditional equation between love, disease, and madness – so vividly depicted in Vergil's *Aeneid* – by repeatedly drawing on the actual plague in *Georgics* 3, as well as other plague episodes from pre- and post-Vergilian literature, for language and imagery.

As has often been recognized (Keith; Elm v.d. Osten; Hardie 2009, 2012), Venus and Fama's actions on the island of Lemnos are deeply indebted to numerous Vergilian figures. The pair enter the poem at the same time (2.104-25), and while together they recall the *Aeneid*'s Fama and Allecto (among others), they also recall intertextual antecedents and descendants of the Vergilian goddesses, including the Homeric Eris (*Il.*4.440-3) and the Tisiphone of *Georgics* 3 (3.551-3). Here, they cooperate to set Lemnos figuratively ablaze, their inflammatory words and behavior recalling earlier texts and contributing to the spread of a metaphorical sickness across the island and through the passage.

Of course, the madness and sickness of love are tropes, and Lucretius's description of love-sickness was already analogous to his description of plague; Vergil had drawn on both passages to create his love-sick Dido. Dido's infection, in turn, is closely echoed by numerous aspects of the *Argonautica*; the Carthaginian queen stands especially prominently behind two Valerian figures, Venus herself (Elm v.d. Osten) and her eventual, most significant, victim, Medea (Hull). Furthermore, in resembling Vergil's Dido, Allecto, and even Amata, Venus also resembles the harbinger of plague from Vergil's *Georgics*, the spotted Calabrian snake, with its fiery gaze (*Geo.*3.433) and *maculosus* belly (*Geo.*3.427, cf. *Aen.*4.643/*Arg.*2.105).

Apart from the intertextually-rife, fury-like onslaught of Venus herself, specific nods at earlier plague passages are subtle. Fama conjures up an image of the plague-infested meadows and lakes (*lacus, pabula*) of the Georgic countryside (*Geo.3.481*) under the influence of Sirius, adapting them to the poisoned banquets and goblets (*dapes, pocula*) of human civilization (*Arg.2.155*); the Lemnian women bring to fruition Sirius's implied activity, setting their island alight and creating heaps of corpses. We see, too, in a simile, Tisiphone interfering with the *dapes et pocula* provided to Phlegyas and Theseus in the Underworld – Tisiphone was, for Vergil, the Fury of plague (*Geo.3.551-3*).

Thus we find additional significance in the use of Tisiphone as the Fury whom Juno mobilizes in the Io-epyllion to prick Io to madness, in lieu of the *asilus* to which Valerius alludes elsewhere (*Arg.3.580-1*, cf. *Geo.3.147-53*) and to which, along with the Calabrian snake, the Vergilian Tisiphone bears strong resemblance (Thomas). Furthermore, Io herself displays symptoms analogous to those of plague (*tremere artus, Arg.4.376*; *aegra siti, Arg.4.379*; *profundo incidit, Arg.4.403-4*). Moreover, *Georgics* 3.481, previously transformed by Fama on Lemnos, is now echoed in the bovine Io's actions (*Arg.4.379*).

Between these two episodes falls the removal of Hylas and Hercules from the epic, brought about by Juno and the nymph Dryope. Dryope serves as an elegizing Allecto (Heerink), thus completing the analogy between the goddess-pairs; importantly, Venus had taken the name Dryope on Lemnos. We can also extend the analogy to their victims, seeing various plague-like symptoms in the distraught Hercules, including a simile that compares him to a Calabrian bull driven mad by an *asilus* (*Arg.3.580-1*), thus again recalling the effects and causes of plague in the *Georgics*.

The parallelism of these episodes helps to bring out their shared engagement with the latent theme of disease (one strand of a much more complex network) that infects the epic, a *pestis* lying hidden as it will hide within Medea's bones (*Arg.*7.252-3), again courtesy of Juno and Venus. With their respective responsibilities over love and air (Feeney), they are fitting vectors of disease in an inherited system that derives plague from celestial influences and equates it with love.

Works Cited

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