



Eduqas GCSE Latin
Component 2: Latin Literature and Sources
(Themes)
Superstition and Magic



VIRGIL
Dido prepares a curse

Teachers should not feel that they need to pass on to their students all the information from these notes; they should choose whatever they think is appropriate.

The examination requires knowledge outside the text only when it is needed in order to understand the text.

The Teacher's Notes contain the follow:

- An **Introduction** to the author and the text, although students will only be asked questions on the content of the source itself.
- **Notes** on the text to assist the teacher.
- **Suggested Questions for Comprehension, Content and Style** to be used with students.
- **Discussion** suggestions and questions for students, and overarching **Themes** which appear across more than one source.
- **Further Information and Reading** for teachers who wish to explore the topic and texts further.

VIRGIL *Dido prepares a curse* (*Aeneid* 4.504-521)

Dido readies herself and the materials needed to perform magic.

Publius Vergilius Maro (70-19BC) was born in Mantua in Cisalpine Gaul. His most famous work is the *Aeneid*, an epic poem of almost 10,000 lines in 12 books which describes the fates of the Trojan survivors following the war with the Greeks. The Trojan hero Aeneas, legendary ancestor of the Romans, charts a course across the Mediterranean, encountering many challenges before finally reaching Italy.

This section comes from the fourth book. Aeneas has reached the African city of Carthage and the queen has fallen in love with him (with some meddling from the gods). When Aeneas is compelled by the gods and fate to continue his journey and leave her behind, queen Dido curses him to suffer for the remainder of his days before taking her own life.

The text is unadapted.

Notes

metre: dactylic hexameter

1 **regina:** the queen mentioned here is Dido, queen of Carthage.

pyra penetrali...sede sub: the **pyra** has a double meaning: she intends to burn items in a ritual but it will double as a pyre for herself after her suicide. The plosive (p) and sibilant (s) alliteration, and elided –i on **penetrali** draw attention to these words, as well as giving an impression of a panicked and disordered mind (she is the queen and the heart of her palace is being used for magic –this is a sinister use of her position of power). The separation of **erecta** on to the next line adds to this.

sub auras: when used with the accusative, **sub** implies ‘under and up to’.

2 **ingenti taedis atque illice secta:** **ingenti** describes the **pyra**; **taedis...secta** are ablatives of instrument.

3-4 **fronde ... funerea:** this would have been cypresses, pitch trees and yews. The enjambment (running on beyond the end of a line) again adds to the impression of a disordered mind.

4 **super:** adverb with **locat**.

exuvias ensemque relictum: an item belonging to the individual to be cursed is a common feature of this type of spell. There is an alliterative, polysyndetic (lots of conjunctions) tricolon (list of three) of items to be ritually destroyed (**exuvias ensem...effigiem**)

5 **effigiem**: an image of the person being cursed in this type of ritual would be typically made from wax (so they would ‘melt with love’) or wood (so that they would be consumed by death).

6 **crines effusa**: literally translates as ‘having been loosened in respect of her hair’. This line has a heavy metre (spondaic) creating a sinister tone.

The **sacerdos** is the Massylian priestess whom Dido has summoned to work magic for her: it can also be translated as sorceress. She has her hair unbound (**crines effusa**) which not only creates a dramatic image but is common in ancient depictions of witches. Social stigma was attached to being an older woman with long, untied hair (It might be interesting to discuss whether this is still true).

7 **ter centum tonat ore deos**: ‘one hundred gods’ is the standard invocation. The addition of ‘three’ makes it seem even more magical (three is a magic number). The vivid vocabulary choice of **tonat** gives the sense that she ‘bellows out’.

Erebumque Chaosque: Erebus was the personification of Darkness who lived in the Underworld. Chaos was the personification of a void: the first thing to exist and the mother of Erebus.

8 **tergeminamque Hecaten, tria virginis ora Dianae**: the magical number three is repeated twice more, creating a tricolon and thus magnifying the power of three. Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, was depicted as having three bodies. This seems to have been linked to the moon (the full moon, the half moon, and the new moon). The goddess Diana was believed to have three ‘faces’: the face she wore in the sky was that of the moon, the goddess Luna; the face on the earth was that of the huntress Diana; and the face she wore in the Underworld was Hecate. Diana was also known as Trivia, the goddess of the crossroads, and this seems to be how she became associated with Hecate. The crossroad was a place of mystical power and where spirits were supposed to gather. Trivia was a goddess to be feared: she served as a psychopomp (a guide of souls) who took the dead to the Underworld.

9 **latices simulatos fontis Averni**: as this passage makes clear, sometime substitutions could be made in spells for items which could not be acquired. Avernus was the entrance to the Underworld, often depicted as a lake. The water here will be poured out in an offering.

10 the translation is **pubentes herbae** (powerful herbs) **messae** (harvested) **aenis falcibus** (with bronze sickles) **ad lunam** (by moonlight) **quaeruntur** (are found) **cum lacte** (with juice) **nigri veneni** (of black poison)

The separation of words which agree (**falcibus...aenis, messae...herbae, nigri...veneni**) in these lines suggests the wildness of the scene.

falcibus...aenis: bronze was used for metal items which were used in magic and divination. Iron was used when you wished to dispel magic. The vestiges of this belief can be seen even today in the lucky (iron) horseshoe.

Line 11 is spondaic, creating a menacing tone.

The juxtaposition (placing next to) of **nigri** and **lacte** (*lac* means 'milk' or 'milky juice') extends the idea of everything being wrong. **ad lunam** is traditionally the most magically potent time. **veneni**, delayed at the end of the line, confirms our building suspicion that these herbs cannot be good.

- 13 this line is not complete. There are over 50 half lines in the *Aeneid*, proof of its unfinished state. Virgil died before he could finish editing the poem.

The **amor** being referred to is a *hippomanes*, a fleshy growth that supposedly grew on the forehead of foals whilst they were in the womb. According to legend, if a person stole it before the mare herself could rip it from her foal then that person could use its magical properties but the horse would reject her baby.

- 14 **ipsa**: this switches the view back to Dido. She is holding the **mola**, the salted flour cakes used in rituals (c.f. Martial) and **manibusque piis**, she has washed her hands in a purification ritual.

- 15 **unum exuta pedem vinclis**: 'stripped in respect of one foot by the fastenings'. In order to work magic effectively, a person had to free themselves from knots which might impede the power flowing through them. This would involve undoing hair, untying belts, and undoing fastenings elsewhere. The fact that she leaves one shoe bound is linked to the curse she is casting: she will be free, Aeneas will be 'bound' to her will.

- 16 **moritura**: agrees with **ipsa**. Dido plans to kill herself following the curse. In this way a malevolent spirit (her own) will be bound to the spell.

conscia fati sidera: the stars are commonly depicted as being witnesses to all.

- 17-18 the translation is **si quod numen iustumque memorque** (if any divine power, both just and mindful) **curae habet** (has in its care) **amantes** (lovers) **non aequo foedere** (in an unequal relationship) ...

non aequo foedere: a reference to Aeneas. Dido is deeply in love with him but he is leaving.

She does not specify a god, only asks for whoever is sympathetic to listen to her prayer. This is a common plea when asking for divine assistance.

Suggested Questions for Comprehension

Read the entire text aloud, emphasising phrasing and word groups. Then reread each section, asking leading questions so that the class comprehend the meaning of the Latin text. It may be desirable to produce a written translation once the students have understood the Latin.

lines 1-5:

- What has the queen built? Where is it? How big is it? What is making it so big?
- What has she spread the place with? What has she crowned it with?
- What three items are listed here? Where has she placed them?

lines 6-8:

- What is standing around? Who else is there? What does her hair look like?
- How many gods in total does she call upon? Which ones are named here specifically? How is Hecate described? What are we told about Diana?

lines 9-11:

- What does the priestess do next? What does the water represent?
- She also has some herbs. At what time of day did she harvest them? What did she use to cut them? What material was it made from? What else do we learn about the herbs? What kind of juice do they have and what colour is it?

lines 12-13:

- A love charm is mentioned. Which animal has this come from? Where on the animal was it? How did they get the charm from it?

lines 14-18:

- Where is Dido exactly? How are her hands described? What is she holding?
- What has she done to the sandal on one foot? What has she done to her dress?
- Who does she call upon? What does she intend to do? What seems to have knowledge of her fate?
- What does she do now? What kind of god does she want to listen to her prayer? What kind of person should this god care about? What kind of lovers in particular?

Questions on Content and Style

1. (lines 1-4) How effective is Virgil in setting the tone for the passage? Consider his choice of words and his style of writing.
2. (lines 4-5) What three things has Dido put upon the pyre? Why has she chosen these things?
3. (lines 6-8) Who does the priestess call upon and why are these appropriate?
4. (lines 9-11) How did a witch ensure that her herbs were powerful?
5. (lines 12-13) What was this charm?
6. (lines 14-17) Describe Dido in as much detail as possible.
7. (lines 17-18) To whom does Dido pray here?

Discussion

Themes: curses, witches, magical artefacts

This section is a piece of detailed description: students could make sense of the scene by creating a visual representation (drawing, model, animation etc.) of the text, including as much information as possible.

Students could put together from the passage a detailed description of a Roman witch (in visual or written form), including what she would look like, act like, and be carrying.

There is also a good opportunity to discuss the fact that descriptions such as these are based on misogyny – especially regarding older, unmarried women who have some skill or learning – which has proven pervasive throughout history. There is more on this in the notes on the Ovid text.

General questions on the passage and theme

1. Describe the sorceress in as much detail as you can. Does she fit with the description given by Ovid of Dipsas?
2. How does Virgil create an impression of menace throughout the entire passage?

Further Information and Reading

For more information on witchcraft and witches, refer to the notes on the Ovid passage *Dipsas the Sorceress* in this prescription.

David West, *Virgil, The Aeneid, a new prose translation* (Penguin, 1990)

R.D. Williams, *The Aeneid of Virgil, Books 1-6, edited with introduction and notes* (Macmillan, 1972; repr. Bristol Classical Press, 1996)