

Molle atque Facetum

Ineptiae mihi barbam tondenti quot et quales in mentem incidere solent.
Exemplum hoc accipe.

stridenti miserum stipula disperdere carmen

(Verg. Ecl. III.27)

Sic chartae omnes et recte. At quid si poeta non solum perdere sed etiam pedere subaudire nos volebat? Enimvero dis- praefixum aptius esse ad hoc quam ad illud videtur. Ac ne quis cum hoc carmine hisque cum pastoribus notionem salaciorem parum convenire autumat. Eodem fortasse lusu aures nostras titillare in animo habebat Plautus apud quem haec verba invenimus:

bibe, es, disperde rem

(Cas. 248)

An me convincet aliquis delirationis et medico committet qui ex ambagibus mentis faecem penitus immersam quasi sentinaculo exhauserim?

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INFIXUM STRIDIT SUB PECTORE VULNUS (Virg. Aen. iv.689)

When Dido, after inflicting the fatal wound, is found by her sister 'with life nearly gone', Anna 'caught (her) to her heart...and tried sobbingly to warm her and to dry the black gouts of blood with her dress'. Then Dido 'made an effort to raise her heavy eyes to meet her, and fell fainting'. (Aen. iv.686-9; translations from R.G. Austin's commentary).

The words that follow, infixum stridit sub pectore vulnus, with their echo of tacitum vivit sub pectore vulnus of a very different wound earlier in the book (line 67) and also perhaps of Juno's aeternum...sub pectore vulnus at the beginning of the whole work (i.36) are among the most poignant in the whole passage; but their precise connotation is far from certain, and they have been interpreted in a great variety of ways. An attempt to look at them from the physiological point of view may therefore be not without value, especially in the eyes of those who admit that accurate observation and description are among the ingredients of much of the greatest poetry.

To a large extent the difficulty hinges on the nature of the sound denoted by stridit. A glance at the dictionary is enough to show that the word itself can do little to help. The extremely wide definition offered by Lewis and Short -- 'to utter any harsh, shrill, hissing, whistling, grating, or creaking sound; to creak, hiss, whizz, whistle, rattle, buzz' -- is fully borne out by the examples cited,

which cover the noises made by inter alia flying spears, hot metal quenched in water, snakes, saws, the wings of swans, the hinge of a door, the waves of the sea, ropes in the wind, and the pipe (tibia) of Bacchic worship. The most characteristic verb used by translators of the present passage, revived most recently (and in spite of much earlier condemnation) by P. Dickinson in 1961, is 'to gride', which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'to pierce through..., cut, scrape, or graze along, with a strident(!), grating, or whizzing sound, or so as to cause rasping pain'. The prominence of this verb (which, apparently, was first used by Spenser in this sense) in the context with which we are here concerned appears to be directly due both to the similarity of its sound to that of stridere and to its adoption by Milton in a well-known passage of Paradise Lost (vi.327): 'so sore the griding sword with discontinuous wound passed through him (viz. Satan)'.

Yet, as has been pointed out many times, if a sword can 'gride', a wound cannot. Indeed, it seems at least possible that Anna had removed the sword before drying up the blood with her dress, which would have been the natural (though perhaps not the wisest) thing to do -- unless, of course, Dido had herself removed it earlier (cf. sparsasque manus, 665). In any case, and quite apart from the grammatical subject of stridit, the sword, in inflicting a wound of the kind described could hardly have gone through the sternum: it would probably have been gripped by the tissues in an intercostal space, and would then have moved with the bony cage without any grating sound. In fact the sword is unlikely to have made any noise, at any rate after its first entry; and vulnus must be the real, as well as the grammatical, subject of stridit.

But if a wound cannot 'gride', what kind of sound -- within the wide range of meaning covered by stridit -- can it make? The answer to this question, unless we take the description to be entirely fanciful, must clearly depend on the nature of the wound.

Dido, when her companions found her ferro collapsam (663-4), had evidently put the point of the sword against her chest and fallen forward. The natural assumption that this would cause a direct and penetrating wound of the heart is rendered improbable both by the direction which a sword entering the body in this way would take and by the death agony which followed the infliction of the wound. We may, of course, assume that Dido's death is delayed merely in order to enable Anna to 'sing an aria' to her dying sister; but it is at least possible that Virgil here describes accurately something which he may himself have seen and which at least some of his readers may have seen also. His description, we suggest, is such as to make the latter assumption not merely possible but highly probable.

The emphasis throughout this description is on the respiratory aspect of Dido's difficiles obitus (694). Indeed, this phrase itself appears to imply an echo of the struggle which respiratory distress causes even in the moribund. And the first instinct of a person in respiratory distress is to get from a lying to a sitting position: ter sese attollens cubitoque adnixa levavit (690). The colour of the atri cruores emanating from the wound, moreover, suggests severely cyanotic blood, which can look almost like ink, and which would strike an observer very forcibly. All this is entirely consistent with clinical experience if the wound is a stab-wound, comparatively superficial, penetrating the chest wall and causing a pressure