Another Greek Pun in the Aeneid

In the allusive complex that involves the Aeneid with Catullus 66, David Konstan has noticed a pun that points back to Catullus’ Greek original, Callimachus’ Lock of Berenice.1) When Dido says to Anna, testor, cara, deos et te, germana, tuumque / dulce caput, magicas invitam accingier artis (4.492-3), we not only hear an echo of Catullus 66.40 adiuro teque tuumque caput, but also of the Callimachean original of that line, σὴν τε κάρην ὄμοσα σὸν τὲ βίον (fr. 110.40 Pfeiffer), with cara prompting an acoustic memory of Callimachus’ κάρην (the variation in the quantity of a, as Konstan notes, is typical of ancient literary punning). There is another pun on the Greek original in Virgil’s next, virtually pendant use of Catullus’ passage, at Aeneid 6.456-60:

infelix Dido, verus mihi nuntius ergo
venerat extinctam 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.

As is well known, this oath reworks Catullus 66.39-42 in some detail, with a near-repetition of a whole line and a number of subtler echoes:2)

invita, o regina, tuo de vertice cessi,
invita: adiuro teque tuumque caput, 40
digna ferat quod si quis inaniter adiurarit:
   sed qui se ferro postulet esse parem?

One Virgilian substitution in particular stands out: the ‘stars’, sidera, which in a sense displace ‘you and your head’ to the imitation in Book 4. They supplement the ‘gods above’, superos, in comprehensive polarity with ‘whatever faith there is in the lowest realms of earth’. They also complement the poem’s other oaths by stars: 2.154-5 (Sinon), 3.599-600 (Achaemenides), 4.519-20 (Dido), 9.429 (Nisus). But at Aeneid 6.458 sidera would have an extra point as a Latin pun on Greek σίδηρος, ‘iron’, undoubtedly the Callimachean original of Catullus 66.42 ferro

1) Konstan 2000. On Greek puns in Virgil, including some that point back to specific Greek texts, see O’Hara 1996, 63 and passim.
2) Virgil’s use of Catullus’ passage has most recently been traced and explicated by Wills (1998), who gives bibliography for earlier discussions.
(which also appears at *Aeneid* 6.457, somewhat as at 4.492-3 the reflex of κάρην is ‘split’ between *caput* and *cara*).³)

There are significant differences between how Dido uses the words of the lock and how Aeneas uses them. Whereas the cross-language pun in Book 4 virtually repeats the referent (since the ‘head’ sworn by is equivalent, by a familiar metonymy, to the sister addressed as ‘dear’), that in Book 6 brings together two different referents in the target texts: the iron blade that helped make the hair into stars is punned on as ‘stars’. The wordplay here does not simply signal a chain of indebtedness, but invokes the content of Virgil’s models—the catasterism of Berenice’s lock—and recalls its relevance to his own poem. The imitation in Book 4 (as Konstan concludes by suggesting) points up a difference between Dido and Berenice’s heavenbound lock, reminding us of the former’s less happy destination—emblematized, indeed, by the lock, shorn from her own head at her death, that consigns her head (= her) to the Underworld (4.698-9 verite . . . caput . . . Orco). She herself recognizes that she will not join the stars at 4.322-3 extinctus pudor et, qua sola sidera adibam, / fama prior. To be sure, this refers to her good name as her one route to immortality (compare 1.287, 3.158, 7.99 = 272, and 9.641); yet the Catullan/Callimachean intertext implicit elsewhere invites us to press the literal meaning here and let the contrast with Berenice’s lock emerge.⁴) On the other side, we can compare Aeneas’ intertextual role at 6.460 with the posthumous translation to heaven that Jupiter promised Venus for him (1.259-60 sublimemque feres ad sidera caeli / magnanimum Aenean).⁵) When Aeneas meets Dido in the Underworld, the stars he swears by—in conjunction with the surrounding allusions—remind us that he will one day join them as the lock did, and as Dido will not. And since the severing of Aeneas from his lover divides their peoples as well (the condition predicted at 1.12-22 and in Dido’s curse at 4.622-9), the allusive wordplay also adds a political allegory that is characteristic of the *Aeneid* and is connected with Augustus’ defeat of Ptolemaic Egypt.

---

³) This part of Callimachus’ poem is lost, but the papyrus has σιδήρῳ just below (fr. 110.47 Pfeiffer), where Catullus again gives *ferro*.

⁴) Henry (1878, 701) on this passage compares a later text in which female virtue literally leads to catasterism: Man. 2.31 pietate ad sidera ductam / Erigonen.

⁵) See Wills 1998, 288. Note that Aphrodite/Venus presides over the elevation of both Berenice’s lock and Aeneas.