

Camilla and Virgil's Aesthetic of the Grotesque

Scholars of the *Aeneid* have expended a great deal of energy and ingenuity to explain the figure of Camilla and to reconcile the disparate facets of her character. Analyses of Camilla have generally adopted one of two approaches. The first has sought to explain away the paradoxes of Camilla's character by showing that *in the end* Camilla belongs to one category or another: that she is ultimately not a transgressive figure within the poem and in fact conforms (or is made to conform) to the poem's idea of proper order. The other approach resists this impulse towards resolution and tidiness; it highlights the deep ambivalences that run through the *Aeneid* and the way that the poem's "resolutions" are superficial or impermanent. The reading of Camilla offered in this paper belongs to this second sort. It seeks, however, to be aesthetic rather than thematic: it has less to say about how Camilla reflects Virgil's notions of Rome's place in the cosmic order of the world, and instead focuses on Camilla as an artistic creation. In this regard it builds on Barbara Weiden Boyd's analysis of Camilla as a *thauma* in the ekphrastic tradition (Boyd 1992). Camilla is, despite all the various models, Virgil's own creation (see esp. Horsfall 1988). We should therefore be open to the potential for her to function metapoetically as a symbol of poetic principle. Instead of outlining his poetic and aesthetic principles systematically in a treatise, Virgil reveals his preferences poetically: he shows rather than tells. This paper offers an aesthetic reading of Camilla as an embodiment of Virgil's grotesque aesthetic. Understanding her in this way allows readers to acknowledge the categorical blurriness in her character without needing to resolve it.

For the grotesque to exist as an aesthetic concept, it must exist in two respects. First, it should manifest as properties of the work of art itself. Second, the artwork should provoke in the

audience a particular response. The defining features of the grotesque as an aesthetic are (1) its amalgamation of disparate—even contradictory properties—into a single unified object, and (2) the correspondingly disparate yet simultaneous responses of the audience to that object resulting in a moment of aesthetic confusion or *aporia*. Those responses will evince especially a blend of fear/disgust and humor/delight. The key to aesthetic analysis, therefore, is a necessary emphasis on both the formal properties of the object under consideration (i.e., Camilla) and the reaction and response to that object. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil treats Camilla as an aesthetic object by dramatizing audience reactions to her. In other words, Virgil shows us the aesthetic response he expects his creation to generate. More specifically, he not only portrays Camilla as a figure in whom are united multiple contradictory elements—most particularly but not exclusively in mixing masculine and feminine gender characteristics (see e.g., Becker 1997; Keith 2000: 27–31; McGill 2020: 22–25)—he also demonstrates that she provokes in those who encounter her a correspondingly confused mix of responses.

Virgil signals this when Camilla first appears in book seven in the catalogue of Italian forces (*Aen.* 7.803–817). Her conspicuous position at the end of the catalogue—*after* Turnus—and her striking appearance provokes a sense of awed wonder in the onlookers, suggesting that the sight of Camilla has in some way nullified their rational interpretive faculties (*Aen.* 7.812–817). When she next appears, focalized through Turnus (*Aen.* 11.498–510), she is both a source of dread (*horrenda in virgine*) and of beauty/delight (*decus Italiae virgo*). Ultimately, at the moment of Camilla's death, her killer, Arruns, flees in a confused state (note *turbidus* at *Aen.* 11.814) that is characterized by a mixture of fear and joy: *exterritus Arruns laetitia mixtoque metu* (*Aen.* 11.806–7). The analysis of such reactions to Camilla in combination with the well-established paradoxes of her character reveals a Virgilian conception of the grotesque as an

aesthetic. Finally, it is important to note that Camilla is but one example of this phenomenon.

Other instances can be identified elsewhere in Virgil's poetry. Moreover, Virgil's conception of the grotesque shares common traits with his contemporaries in Rome.

Bibliography

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