

Anchises as an Interpretive Model in Vergil's *Aeneid*
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Though he functions as the chief decision-maker for much of the epic, surprisingly little has been written about Anchises in his role as guide and interpreter. He has been noted as the prime director of the voyage between Troy and Sicily and an advisor indispensable to Aeneas even after his death (Henry, *Vigour of Prophecy* [1990] 116-7). He has also been noted as a sort of prophet and interpreter of signs (Lee, *Fathers and Sons* [1979] 17-8; Lloyd, *TAPhA* [1957] 48ff.). O'Hara's *Death and Optimistic Prophecy*, p. 29f., while an important contribution to the field, does not deal with this passage, mentioning it only in passing. In this paper, I consider Anchises as interpreter not as a mere plot device but as an interpretive model for the reader, one that may serve to illuminate the character of Vergil's ultimate view of Roman destiny (cf. Smith, *Virgil: An Introduction* [Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming]).

In *Aen.* 3.537-43, Anchises interprets a sign on the coast of Italy: *quattuor hic, primum omen, equos in gramine vidi / tondentis campum late, candore nivali. / et pater Anchises 'bellum, o terra hospita, portas: / bello armantur equi, bellum haec armenta minantur. / sed tamen idem olim curru succedere sueti / quadripides et frena iugo concordia ferre: / spes et pacis' ait.* Anchises first interprets the horses as an omen of war and hardship; certainly horses carry such a connotation. However, he immediately qualifies this interpretation, noting that horses are also useful in peace. The reader is left to ponder which is the true interpretation.

Anchises' failure in interpretation is not isolated to this one instance. Earlier in Book 3, the Delphic oracle tells the wandering Trojans: *antiquam exquirite matrem* (*Aen.* 3.96). Anchises interprets this as Crete, the homeland of Teucer (*Aen.* 3.104-110). As proven by the troubles encountered by the Trojans when they try to establish a city, Anchises' interpretation is ultimately incorrect. Clearly, Anchises is no prophet.

However, he is no ordinary man when it comes to the reading of omens (Lloyd, 49). Aeneas receives divine advice and orders many times throughout the epic, but these always come either from a god or other spirit or through the interpretation of another. Anchises, on the other hand, reads signs and omens on numerous occasions throughout the narrative. It is of interest that these signs are without variation given to Aeneas and not to Anchises; even though he does interpret them, Anchises acts exclusively in this role and at no point supplants Aeneas as the hero (Lloyd, 49).

The careful reader of the poem can be said to be in a situation analogous to Anchises': we can certainly see and interpret the themes and events much better than Aeneas and other mere mortals, but we fall short of omniscience with respect to every aspect of this multifaceted work and hold merely an interpretive viewpoint on the action. Like Anchises off the coast of Italy, the reader looks upon an ambiguous omen when he or she seeks to decipher Vergil's true sentiment about Rome and Octavian's reign. The exit from the gate of false dreams in Book 6 and the slaying of Turnus in Book 12 contrast sharply with the catalog of great Romans and Aeneas' repeated displays of *pietas*. Could one not, like Anchises, consider the *Aeneid* along both lines? On a certain level, Anchises was right about the double interpretation of the *Aen.* 3 passage: Aeneas would encounter war and hardship but also discover peace and tranquility in Italy. Accordingly, the message of the *Aeneid* and Vergil's attitude toward Rome should be interpreted not in simple black and white, but a mixture of the two. He will see perils – and certainly they will be many – but he will also see triumph.