

## Matter out of Place: *Fama*, Excess, and Dirt in *Aeneid* 6

When Mary Douglas explored pollution from an anthropologist's viewpoint in *Purity and Danger*, she renewed William James' idea of dirt as a problem of classification or "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966.44; James 1929.131). As Carson puts it, "the poached egg on your plate at breakfast is not dirt; the poached egg on the floor of the Reading Room of the British Museum is" (Carson, 1990.158). One strategy by which the *Aeneid* embeds Rome's imperial destiny in the whole order of the cosmos is to establish a link between a ritual sense of place (such as the proper place for a dead body if pollution is to be avoided) and a geographic sense of place (such as the places in the Italian landscape which commemorate those companions of Aeneas who die en route to Latium). The classification of souls after death forms a pivot between those notions of "place"; the geography of the underworld marks out both the remembered reputations of individual humans and the fundamental ethical systems which order human life. A sequence of events that would keep Aeneas from founding Lavinium is made to seem as disorderly as the allocation of a virtuous soul to Tartarus would be, and as messy as the pollution caused by an unburied corpse.

Anxieties about category confusion converge at the start of *Aeneid* 6, as Aeneas prepares to descend into the underworld and disturb the boundaries that divide people ontologically as well as spatially – the boundaries between the dead and the living. Aeneas can plan to return from his visit to the dead only because of his capacity to exceed normal human limits, thanks to his blazing, boundary-crossing *uirtus*, and because he himself is the product of a category-confusing union between god and mortal. As the Sibyl tells him, "*pauci, quos aequus amavit / Iuppiter aut ardens euexit ad aethera uirtus, / dis geniti potuere*" (6.129-131). The Sibyl's

language recalls the prodigies that Daedalus has commemorated on the doors to Apollo's temple (see Fitzgerald 1984.52 on the "series of monstrous combinations" that kick off *Aeneid* 6).

Aeneas, with his divine (instead of bestial) birth and with his expectation of reaching the heavens, inverts these prodigies: the Minotaur as *Veneris monimenta nefandae* (6.26) and the daring skywards ascent of Daedalus and Icarus (6.15), a story perpetuated by *fama* (6.14).

But another kind of matter out of place threatens Aeneas' enterprise; the whole fleet is polluted by an unburied body, which Aeneas soon identifies as that of Misenus (*totamque incestat funere classem* 6.150). In commanding Misenus' burial, the Sibyl reasserts the primacy of certain categories that order the cosmos even as she seems to help Aeneas flout others, just as she will reassert order again when the unburied Palinurus pleads in vain to cross Acheron with Aeneas (6.363-376). The rituals of lamentation and burial carried out by the Trojans are described in hyperbolic terms that evoke the language of *fama*, by which humans cross the boundaries of mortality to reach the heavens. The Trojans heap the altar of Misenus' tomb with trees and strive to build it up to the sky (*caeloque educere certant* 6.178). In place of an excess of polluting matter (the body spilled on the shore 6.162), the Trojans' extreme grief is transmuted into an excess of memory, which will be sustained across time through the naming of the Italian landscape (6.234-235).

Up to this point, I have emphasized how the *Aeneid* celebrates a particular order of things by co-opting the Sibyl's divine authority in its poetic enterprise. But the *fama* generated by epic is also the result of disorder (disorder can produce an Aeneas, just as it can give birth to a Minotaur). The *Aeneid*'s story is worth telling and worth remembering because of Juno's excessive, unforgetting anger (1.4) – and because Jupiter collaborates in Juno's narrative-generating excesses.

**Works Cited:**

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