Fowl Play at Actium

This paper argues that the ecphrasis of *Aeneid* 8 exploits a threefold allusion to the Kyknos monomachymyths of Ps.-Hesiod, Stesichorus, and the *Cypria.* The resulting synthesis is ideally suited to the narrative and political needs of the latter half of the *Aeneid*.

Virgil’s evocation of *kyknomachia* myth is patent, with allusion at two axial moments. The descriptor by which Virgil introduces the *textum* of Aeneas’ shield, *non enarrabile,* is a calque on a characteristic collocation of the Ps.-Hesiodic *Scutum*, *ou ti phateios* (Eichholz 1966, 47). Similarly, the opening of the ecphrastic centerpiece, Actium, features *argento clari delphines* (8.673), long recognized as a recollection of *Sc*. 212. Such allusion is natural; Aeneas’ role as Heracles’ successor is a key theme in *Aeneid* 8. However, comparison of heroes and their respective shields also invites comparison of their adversaries. On this count, Virgil’s *textum* offers rich possibilities.

Heracles’ opponent in the *Scutum* is Kyknos, a brigand whom the hero destroys at Apollo’s behest for usurping the god’s *temenos* and stealing hecatombs from pilgrims (cf. *Sc*. 57-8, 68-9, 478-80). However, complex allusion is normative in Virgil. Stesichorus’ *Kyknos* also treated this myth, adding the salacious detail that Kyknos beheaded his victims and built Apollo an impious altar of skulls (207 PMG). Virgil exploits these motifs in his shaping of the Cacus episode in book 8. As with Kyknos, Hercules appears as a god-sent *soter* (8.200-1) to defeat a head-hunting (9.196-7) and thieving (8.205 ff.) monster. In Stesichorean fashion, Virgil also adds a major embellishment to the myth, transforming Cacus into a cave-dwelling, fire-breathing fiend.

Context suggests a further, more subtle, allusion. We are in the Iliadic section of the epic and Aeneas will repeat the Achillean story arc of loss, return, and revenge in the coming books. Moreover, evocations of the Herculean shield and *kyknomachia* occur at a point where the narrative clearly recalls the divine arms fashioning of *Iliad* 18. These parallels to Achilles introduce a new potentiality, for, in the *Cypria*, he balanced the death of Protesilaos by killing another Kyknos, son of Poseidon (Procl. *Chr*. 149-51). Pindar alludes to the event twice (*Ol*. 2.82, *Is*. 5.39), suggesting its prominence in the epic cycle. Aristotle supplies the tradition that this Kyknos was an invulnerable foe who prevented the Achaeans from landing at Troy (Arist. *Rh*. 1396 b15-18).

The interweaving of these two subtexts generates a significant prolepsis. Turnus’ challenge of the Trojan arrival echoes Kyknos’ opposition in the Homeric Cycle. Like that Kyknos, his death at the hands of an Achilles figure lays the foundation for fated events. In other aspects, however, his characterization mirrors the Herculean Kyknos: his adversary is commissioned by Apollo (3.154-88) and he will adorn his chariot with heads (12.509-12). Two Virgilian innovations strengthen the parallelism. Virgil broke with tradition in *Aeneid* 7, casting Turnus as a failed suitor rather than a betrayed fiancé (Serv. ad 12.31; cf. Horsfall 2000, 82, 287-9), a change that undermines the legitimacy of his bellicosity and assimilates him to the lawless behavior of Kyknos. The derivation of Laurentum from the *laurus* dedicated to Apollo at the city’s founding is also unique (Castagnoli 1996, 325). In seizing the *arx Laurenti*, Turnus, like Kyknos, usurps Apollonian space.

Less comfortable connotations also lie close at hand, for the placement of the *kyknomachia* allusions invites specific application to Actium and Augustus. The princeps appears as Apollo’s champion against an opposing and potentially usurping Antony; however, he concludes his triumph by fastening trophies to the god’s Palatine temple. As Putnam (1995, 291-2) has observed, the diction closely recalls the head-hunting of Cacus. Text and subtext combine to suggest a disquieting portrait of Augustus as a “frenemy” and to invite comparison between Actium and the opening events a war willed by a capricious Zeus for the sake of depopulation.

The strength of the *kyknomachia* allusion lies in its polyformity. Facile comparison anticipates and legitimizes Turnus’ and Antony’s deaths, but closer examination suggests a problematic similitude between victor and vanquished. Virgil uses this synthesis of conflicting possibilities to mediate the tension between living memory of civil wars and the cautious optimism of Rome in the 20s.

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