

Arma Virginemque?

The Camilla section of *Aeneid* 11 has been misunderstood. *Quellenforschung* has led to ingenious (Arrigoni 1982) but unconvincing (Horsfall 1988) speculation. An assessment like Anderson's (1997) – the episode is “understated,” Camilla's entry into war is “sadly heroic,” and Camilla herself possesses “grandeur” – remains, at the very best, incomplete. Moreover, any reading focused on religion as the key feature (Köves-Zulauf 1978); on a pattern of sexuality, sterility, and destruction (Mitchell 1991) or initiation (Capdeville 1992); on lycanthropy as a theme (Fratantuono 2007); on the Camilliad as an allegory for the defeat of Cleopatra (Alessio 1993); on its function as an Italian epic within a Roman one (Ratti 2006); or the like, is bound to disappoint, starting as they all do from a mistaken premise.

The premise is that throughout Book 11, Vergil is entirely in earnest. He is not. That much should be clear from Knauer's demonstration (1964) that the Camilla episode is closely modeled on *Iliad* 16. An utterly persuasive demonstration, and yet to my knowledge, no one has fully pursued its implications. Careful comparison of the Latin verses to their Greek intertext reveals that this latter part of the *Aeneid*'s penultimate book is akin to a scherzo movement – lively, fantastic, playful when it is not macabre – before the crescendo of the finale. Contrast Achilles' simile at *Il.* 16.7-10, likening Patroclus to a little girl, with Metabus's escape from Privernum at *A.* 11.539-46. Two parents in a rush, two little girls gathered up in their arms, and then this sly detail: Metabus makes Camilla his “companion in exile” (*exsilio comitem*, 11.542). *Comes* for an infant is unexpected and slightly odd. Surely, though, the word could be a translation of *hetairos* (cf. *Il.* 17.411, 18.80)? It appears that Vergil has turned the *Iliad* inside out.

There, Achilles' weeping companion is like a little girl. That merely figurative girl then leaps directly into Vergil's narrative: here, a little girl is like Patroclus. The Homeric simile, for its part, deepens the pathos of Patroclus's death; inconsistent with pathos is the amusing suggestion that the infant Camilla is a veritable Patroclus.

A rigorously intertextual reading recasts this episode as *not* wholly in earnest, that is, as both playful and subversively ironic. Hutcheon (1995) lists five structural elements commonly taken to signal irony. Of these, Vergil makes extensive use of mimicry, exaggeration, incongruity, and literalization, while maintaining the tonal and stylistic register of epic. Throughout the Camilla episode, I argue, Vergil has laid down the weight of epic gravity and thereby gained some distance from epic convention.

It is said that irony's distancing effect can reveal new vistas. What vista? Although in this venue I can merely outline my answer, I see the allusion to the poem's incipit at 11.747 (*arma virumque ferens*) as telling. In Book 11, Vergil insists on an intimate and fatal connection between arms and Camilla: *arma virginemque*, as it were. So close is this connection that she seems "somewhat altered" (*mutata parte*, 11.543) in the degree to which she herself exhibits the attributes of a weapon (Basson 1986). An ironic reading, then, enables us to see Camilla as a fantastical character, metaphorically given birth by, wedded to, and made the mother of a spear, or put it another way, as a sort of hypothetical, i.e., *vir(go)* subsumed in *arma*. Her metamorphosis functions as a harbinger of the climactic scene at the conclusion of the poem, in which the *vir* himself undergoes a similar transformation into what Wiltshire (1989) calls "a monolith, a facade behind which there is nothing except more of the same." Why, in sum, does the poet feature Camilla so prominently at this late stage, in an interlude that does not advance the

storyline? Because Camilla's experience prefigures, in an ironic mode, the deadly serious fate not only of Turnus (*A.* 11.831 = 12.952) but also of Aeneas, just as Patroclus is a forerunner for Hector (*Il.* 16.856-57 = 22.362) and ultimately for Achilles, too.

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