

Prophecy, Poetry, Myth, and History: The Prophetic and Poetic Role of Carmenta in the *Aeneid*

No, Virgil, no:

Not even the first of the Romans can learn

His Roman history in the future tense,

Not even to serve your political turn:

Hindsight as foresight makes no sense.

W.H. Auden, "Secondary Epic"

W.H. Auden's poem recognizes one of the most problematic interpretive questions in analyzing the political content of Virgil's foundational epic, the *Aeneid*: how, precisely, are we to read the complex interrelationship of past and present that simultaneously creates a historical narrative out of legend and predicts future events as a result of that narrative?

Rather than looking backwards as a historian, Virgil sets his text in the past and narrates his present as if it were the predicted future: the buildings on the Palatine, the battle of Actium, and the lineage of Augustus all enter the narrative as predictions. The figures associated with prophecy in the *Aeneid* are also the characters responsible for narrating what would have been history to Virgil's contemporaries. The Cumaean Sibyl in Book VI, for example, is a traditionally prophetic character, but in the *Aeneid* she serves as a prophet only to the characters within the story: to the reader, she is a historian laying out the lineage of Rome's past rulers. In order to better understand the complex relationship of past, present, and future, it is instructive to examine the character of Carmenta, Evander's mother, who has ancient associations with both poetry and prophecy.

In Book VIII, Evander credits Carmenta's prophetic abilities with guiding him to settle at Pallanteum and, by extension, placing him where he needs to be to serve his role in guiding

Aeneas to the site of Rome; her prophecy both predicts and creates the future. Her skill as a *vates fatidica* offers important insights into the interplay of history, myth, prophecy, and poetry in Virgil's epic. In order to explore the wide-ranging implications of her brief appearance in the narrative, it is first necessary to introduce the range of associations that Carmenta could have evoked for an Augustan-age reader and to examine the variety of references that Virgil's text recalls. This paper examines the ancient evidence for the mythological figure of Carmenta and argues that understanding the range of traits associated with her character is essential to fully understand the intersection of prophecy and poetry within the epic.

Examining Virgil's treatment of Carmenta demonstrates a fascinating relationship among prophecy, poetry, myth, and history. Virgil shows how poetry can record the predictions of prophecy as fact, establishing a particular mythology as history by tying it in with retrojected historical truths that are spoken of as if projected forward with equal degrees of likelihood.

Works Cited

Auden, W.H. "Secondary Epic." In *Homage to Clio*. New York: 1955.