The Literary Afterlife of a Vergilian Villain: Phlegyas in Flavian Epic

This paper examines the Flavian epicists' reception of the Vergilian villain Phlegyas, whose punishment in Tartarus features prominently in *Aeneid* 6. While both Valerius Flaccus and Statius engage directly with Vergil's portrait of Phlegyas, I am more interested in how they obliquely evoke the Vergilian figure by introducing characters who bear his name. By examining these avatars of the more famous Phlegyas, I offer a new contribution to the lively discussion of Flavian epic's remarkable intertextuality, one of the more exciting developments in the study of Roman poetry over the last thirty-five years. Additionally, my reading of the Phlegyas introduced in *Argonautica* 3 suggests that Servius' assertion that the Vergilian Phlegyas was an arsonist had gained currency by the Flavian period.

In the *Aeneid*, we meet Phlegyas near the end of the Sibyl's description of the wicked souls in Tartarus (*Aen*. 6.618-20): *Phlegyasque miserrimus omnis / admonet et magna testatur voce per umbras: / "discite iustitiam moniti et non temnere divos*." Vergil gives prominence to Phlegyas not only by deploying the superlative *miserrimus*, but also by giving him a speaking part. This is puzzling because Phlegyas' presence in Tartarus is not previously attested and neither his crime nor his punishment is mentioned (see Zetzel 1989, 270). When it comes to the punishment, the Vergilian lacuna is filled by Valerius Flaccus, who informs us that the Fury Tisiphone, like a veritable Harpy, torments Phlegyas by befouling his food (*Arg*. 2.193-5): *adcubat attonitum Phlegyan … iuxta / Tisiphone saevasque dapes et pocula libat, / tormenti genus, et nigris amplectitur hydris* (see Poortvliet 1991, 125-7). Statius adopts Valerius' innovation while characteristically putting his own spin on Phlegyas' Phineus-like torture (*Theb*. 1.712-15): *ultrix tibi torva Megaera / ieiunum Phlegyan subter cava saxa iacentem / aeterno*

premit accubitu dapibusque profanis / instimulat, sed mixta famem fastidia vincunt (see Caviglia 1973, 168-70 and Briguglio 2020, 277-80). An account of Phlegyas' crime, on the other hand, is not found until Servius, whose note on *Aeneid* 6.618 claims that Phlegyas burned Apollo's temple after discovering the god had raped his daughter Coronis: *Phlegyas autem, Ixionis pater, habuit Coronidem filiam, quam Apollo vitiavit … quod pater dolens, incendit Apollinis templum et eius sagittis est ad inferos trusus*.

The late attestation of Phlegyas' fiery retaliation has understandably prompted critics to caution against associating it with the Vergilian character (see Horsfall 2013, 428-9). However, a passage in *Argonautica* 3 provides clues that the story of Phlegyas' incendiary revenge against Apollo was current by the Flavian period. During the nyctomachy between the Argonauts and Doliones, a Cyzican named Phlegyas enters the fray (*Arg*. 3.124-5): *ecce gravem nodis pinguique bitumine quassans / lampada turbata Phlegyas decurrit ab urbe*. That this Phlegyas is an avatar of the more famous Vergilian criminal is not in doubt (see Stover 2012, 142-6). However, his torch-bearing attack has not gotten sufficient attention. I suggest that by arming the Cyzican with this weapon Valerius slyly hints at the story of Phlegyas' attack on Apollo's temple. Moreover, the fact that Hercules, who had been using his oaken club during the battle, switches weapons and kills Phlegyas with bow and arrow (3.133-4) puts him in the role of Servius' Apollo. Phlegyas' fiery death—he bursts into flames when struck by Hercules' arrow (3.135-7)—is thus a most fitting punishment for this embodiment of the infamous arsonist of the same name.

Valerius' engagement with Vergil's Phlegyas started a trend. Statius also refers to the Vergilian criminal early in his epic (*Theb*. 1.712-15), thus laying the groundwork for introducing an avatar of him later in the poem. In *Thebaid* 6, a man named Phlegyas takes part in the discus

competition. As he prepares to make his throw, the narrator notes that he lacks restraint (*spes…immodicas*, 6.691-2), which is immediately followed by a rhetorical question (6.692-3): *quid numina contra / tendere fas homini*? This question is very strange, since Phlegyas is not contending against the gods, but rather against two mortals, Menestheus and Hippomedon. However, if we understand this Phlegyas as an avatar of the Vergilian sinner, we can better account for his immoderation and opposition to the gods. And like the Vergilian Phlegyas, the misfortune of the discus-throwing Phlegyas assumes an admonitory status for others (*casus Phlegyae monet*, 6.706).

Vergil's Phlegyas is famous for his Tartarean afterlife. This paper examines his fascinating literary afterlife in post-Vergilian epic.

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