

Flight Paths: Re-examining Swans in Vergil's *Aeneid*

“Behold twelve joyful swans in a flock” (*aspice bis senos laetantis agmine cycnos*) says Venus to her disheartened son (*Aen.* 1.393). The interpretation of Venus’s omen for Aeneas is based on the behavior of swans and eagles: just as a flock of swans, after an eagle attempted to overthrow them, playfully land, so too will the Trojans find a safe harbor (*Aen.* 1.393-400). Scholars have emendated the text to replace *terras* with *stellas* (Hardie 1987 and Green 2009), in which case the swans flying high toward the stars signifies Aeneas completing his destiny and being deified for establishing the location and peoples that will found Rome. Thus, a strong swan-Trojan association is formed from the onset of the *Aeneid*.

However, the swan-Trojan symbolism clashes with a passage in Book 12. Juturna incites the Latins into battle by contriving a new omen: an eagle attacks a flock of swans, snatches the lead swan, but is driven off by the flock and is forced to release the lead swan (*Aen.* 12.247-256). The Latins identify themselves as the swans and Aeneas as the eagle. Juturna’s use of swan-Latin symbolism directly challenges Venus’ omen to Aeneas. Scholars explain the discrepancy by claiming that Juturna’s omen is a false prophecy since Juturna herself is not a god (Hardie 1987, 150, Green 2009, 157). Venus’ authority is understood in Book 1 as she reassures Aeneas, and the audience, of her ability to read the auspices and interprets the omen for him (*Aen.* 1.392, 1.399-400). Thus, Vergil validates the swan-Trojan symbol explicitly.

I contend that the swan simile in Book 7—in which the troops of the Latin leader Messapus are compared to singing swans returning to the clouds after feeding—better contextualizes and validates Juturna’s omen than Venus’ (*Aen.* 7.698-705). I first examine how the simile’s location in Book 7 presupposes Juturna’s omen. The simile falls in the middle of the

catalogue of Latin leaders, which introduces a swan-Latin association. The connection between swans and Messapus' men can then be extrapolated to the Latin forces at large. And in Book 12, it is in fact the Rutulians who first salute Juturna's omen—and thus self-identify as the swans—not any of Messapus' troops.

I then compare the physical landscapes embedded in the two augury scenes and the simile, arguing that the clouds, pasture, and river in the Book 7 simile recontextualize Venus' omen to Aeneas in Book 1 and Juturna's omen in Book 12. For example, the swans dominate the sky in the simile: “the snowy swans between flowing clouds” (*nivei liquida inter nubile cycni*) and “an airy cloud of raucous swans” (*aeriam...volucrum raucarum...nubem*) (*Aen.* 7.699, 704-705). The emphasis on the swans being in the air calls back to Venus' omen where the swans flying undisturbed signifies victory and a completion of destiny for Aeneas. Therefore, the swans in Book 7, since they are flying without an eagle present, could signify victory for the Latins. The significance of swans occupying the sky then complicates Juturna's omen in Book 12 because even though the swans in Book 12 successfully drive away the eagle by forming themselves into a cloud (*facta nube*), the eagle “escapes deeply into the clouds” (*penitusque in nubile fugit*) and occupies the same, potentially triumphant cloud-space (*Aen.* 12.254, 12.256).

Reading the swan-eagle omens in Books 1 and 12 through the lens of the swan simile in Book 7 complicates them further because the Latin-Trojan symbols get conflated with one another. The conflation of symbols—and therefore identities—of the Latins and Trojans makes Juturna's omen doubly true as both the Latins and Trojans can be interpreted as victors.

Works Cited

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