

An *Aeneid* for the Borgias: Vergilian Mythmaking in Ercole Strozzi's *Epicedium Caesaris Borgiae Ducis* (1507)

The closing years of the fifteenth century in Italy were marked by the ascent of the notorious Borgia family, led by the patriarch Rodrigo Borgia during his tenure as Pope Alexander VI. Equally famed, in their own time and in posterity, were his children Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia—the former for his brief but explosive military career, the latter for a series of high-profile marriages, patronage of the arts, and an air of scandalous rumor. In 1503, with the death of Pope Alexander, the family's fortunes declined precipitously, culminating in Cesare's death in battle in 1507, while Lucrezia survived the tumult as duchess of the prosperous city-state of Ferrara.

Within the following year, the Ferrarese poet Ercole Strozzi, closely connected to the duchess Lucrezia, composed a poem in Latin hexameters that commemorates the fallen Cesare Borgia's achievements, directly addressed and dedicated to Lucrezia. Entitled *Epicedium of Duke Cesare Borgia (Epicedium Caesaris Borgiae Ducis)*, Strozzi's work is profoundly influenced by Vergil's *Aeneid* not only in its language and narrative, but also its approach to political messaging. This paper explores this uniquely creative and largely unstudied example of Vergilian reception, in particular how it adapts the *Aeneid*'s strategies of political legitimation and iconography—originally applied to the emperor Augustus, his family, and other Roman elites—to defend the Borgias' legacy and justify their short-lived dominance in Italian affairs.

Strozzi's *Epicedium* comprises 494 verses that imaginatively describe the character and career of Cesare, provide consolation to Lucrezia, and reflect on the calamities of Rome's recent history. Fusing the style of mythological epic with the genres of the *laudatio funebris* and

consolatio, Strozzi tailors classical encomiastic and consolatory topoi to a heroic narrative framework adapted through set-pieces inspired by the *Aeneid*.

Especially memorable—and the main focus of this paper’s discussion—is the central *narratio* on Mount Olympus that casts the Borgias as characters in their own miniature *Aeneid*. Pallas Athena, the warrior Cesare’s patron goddess, fears for her champion’s life in his final years, and petitions Jupiter for his preservation. In a restaging of the council in *Aeneid* 10, Pallas disputes with a hostile Venus (152-220), who, as *genetrix* of the Roman people, argues that rule over Italy should remain in the hands of Italians, rather than the Spanish Borgias. Their argument prompts the king of the gods to divulge the designs of fate—much as he does in *Aeneid* 1—for Cesare and the Borgia bloodline (221-299). Inverting the Vergilian prophecy of the Julian future, Strozzi’s Jupiter spins a foundation myth for the house of Borgia that traces their genealogy back to the earliest settlers of Italy and Greece, revealing their ultimate ancestor to be Jupiter himself. The tale also pointedly undermines the prejudice of Venus (and many of the Borgias’ historical contemporaries) against the family’s Spanish origin by identifying them as migrant Pelasgians who first dwelt in Italy as Oenotrians in distant antiquity, and only later settled in Saguntum in Spain.

While the *Epicedium*’s debt to Vergil on artistic and intertextual grounds is clear throughout the poem, the celestial debate about Borgia supremacy and invented myth of their origins foreground a further layer of its engagement with the *Aeneid*—its integration of political rhetoric and iconography through epic mythmaking. The ways in which the *Aeneid*, in at least one of its many voices, buttresses the claims and image of Augustus and others has been richly explored in scholarship (e.g., recently, Giusti 2018, Xinyue 2022, Wimperis 2024). This socially

and politically engaged aspect of the *Aeneid*'s storytelling underpins my paper, which reads some key tactics of Vergilian political myth in Strozzi's work, applied now to the Borgias.

Three such tactics that anchor the paper's discussion are: 1) the use of foundation myths to contextualize the origins of an illustrious lineage; 2) aetiological etymologies for the names of people and places that support a mythical origin story; and 3) weaving the deeds of individuals or families into well-known mythological or historical events. Strozzi's Olympian *narratio* of the Borgias' ancient origins strongly aligns with these techniques, mobilized for the defense and praise of his patroness' now-tarnished lineage. Investigating these elements of the *Epicedium* in dialogue with the *Aeneid*, the paper aims both to invite broader awareness of this versatile example of classical reception, and to elucidate, through Strozzi's adaptation, encomiastic strategies employed by Vergil that remained influential long after antiquity.

Bibliography

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