

Deep Roots: The Oak Tree as Augustan Symbol in Vergil's *Aeneid* 4.437-449

Vergil's *pius* Aeneas has been widely recognized as the embodiment of the *mos maiorum*, the custom of the ancients, as well as a cleverly crafted image of Augustus as the founder of the new Roman age. In Book 4 of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas is compared to a stout oak tree (*quercus, robur*), an acknowledged symbol of Roman virtue, weathering a storm (*Aen.* 4.437-449). In this passage, Vergil describes the unfaltering disposition of Aeneas in the face of beseeching Anna; note that O'Hara (2012: 351) points out this simile is in stark contrast to other epic references where the tree does in fact fall. Because the roots of this venerable tree stretch all the way down to Tartarus, the tree is resolute, and just so Aeneas is deaf to Anna's protestations. This paper argues that Aeneas as the oak tree destabilizes the august *mos maiorum* revitalized by the new age of Augustus by implying its foundation is fixed in Tartarus, the nadir of subjugation and punishment.

This simile comes at a pivotal point in the narrative where Aeneas finally accepts his destiny to found the new Troy, which will one day rule over the entire world. The symbolic nature of the oak tree is highlighted in this simile, and also has contemporary resonance with the political symbolism of Vergil's day. In 27 BC, Augustus was granted the honor of perpetually adorning his door with the *civica corona*, the Civic Crown, which is made from oak leaves. According to Pliny the Elder, this crown is the pinnacle of Roman military virtue, but also was symbolic of the clemency of the emperors (*Nat. Hist.* 16.3.1). The association with Augustus, who initiated his new Roman age through brutal civil war and a well-documented lack of clemency, therefore, mars the dignified qualities of both the Civic Crown and the oak tree. Moreover, one of Augustus' primary concerns for his new age was the reintegration of the *mos maiorum* into Roman society.

But Vergil's simile may imply that the roots of this Augustan moral code are intertwined with his domination of the Rome.

The Aeneas simile in book 4 of the *Aeneid* exhibits a subtextual critique of Roman morality and ideals in connection with the newly founded imperial regime of Augustus. This paper will explore various subtextual, as well as intratextual, connections that exhibit Vergil's challenge to the idea of the rejuvenated Augustan *mos maiorum*. Vergil hints this moral system is embedded in inescapable punishment and servitude by comparing the unfaltering nature of Aeneas to the iconic symbol of ancient Roman virtue and morality: the oak tree. It is not a system built not on virtuous Elysium, but on the carnage and oppression of Tartarus.

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