

The Barker at the Threshold: Hecate at the End of Vergil's Eighth *Eclogue*

The song of Alphisiboeus (64-109) in Vergil's eighth *Eclogue* is the first extant description of magic in Latin literature. In it, an unnamed speaker, accompanied by her servant Amaryllis, performs a complicated ritual procedure in order to entice the absent Daphnis to return to her. Much has been said about the song's representation of ancient magical practice (Faraone) and its adaptation of Theocritus' second *Idyll* (Clausen, Coleman, Gigante, Richter). But comparatively little has been said about the enigmatic final lines of the poem. In this paper, I offer a new interpretation of the poem's end: the barking of the dog Hylax portends mortal danger for the speaker. I argue that this decidedly darker reading lends greater unity to the poem as a whole and better situates it in the Roman literary tradition of magic, but offers a grim commentary on magic as an avenue for feminine power.

At the end of the ritual, the speaker orders Amaryllis to gather ashes from the fire, throw them into the river, and return without looking back (101-102). But the procedure is interrupted: as Amaryllis tries to gather the ashes, the fire suddenly flares up again (105-106). Her prayer for a good omen is answered by the barking of Hylax (from ὑλακτέω, "bark") at the threshold (*in limine latrat*, 107). The speaker takes both signs as favorable—indeed as signs of Daphnis' return—for she immediately calls a halt to the ritual (*parcite, ab urbe uenit, iam parcite carmina, Daphnis*, 109). Nearly all modern scholars (e.g., Buriss, Coleman, Ogden, Richter) agree with the speaker's assessment and read the dog's barking as signaling the happy end to a successful ritual.

But in Vergil's Hellenistic antecedents the barking of dogs during a magical ritual is invariably a dangerous omen. In her instructions for propitiating Hecate, Medea stresses that Jason should not let the barking of dogs (κυνῶν ὑλακίη, *Arg.* 3.1040) cause him to turn around, or

he may never return to his comrades (1040-1041). The reason becomes clear once Jason performs the ritual: Hecate herself appears amidst the barking of dogs from the underworld (ἀμφὶ δὲ τήνγε | ὀξείη ὑλακῆ χθόνιοι κύνες ἐφθέγγοντο, 3.1216-1217). It is not only the goddess' approach that should be feared; the dogs themselves are dangerous (Johnston). When confronting the bronze giant Talos, Medea summons the dogs of Hades, who devour the life force of the living (μέλπε δὲ Κῆρας | θυμοβόρους, Αἶδαο θαὸς κύνας, αἱ περὶ πᾶσαν | ἡέρα δινεύουσαι ἐπὶ ζωοῖσιν ἄγονται, 4.1665-1667). And in Theocritus' second *Idyll*—the model for Vergil's eighth *Eclogue*—Simaetha knows that the howling of dogs must be met with clashing bronze in order to prevent the goddess' approach (ταὶ κύνες ἄμμιν ἀνὰ πτόλιν ὠρύονται | ἄ θεὸς ἐν τριόδοισι· τὸ χαλκέον ὡς τάχος ἄχει, 35-36). The association of dogs with Hecate, magic, and the underworld continues into the Latin literature of the Augustan period (Hor. *Serm.* 1.8.33-35; Tib. 1.2.52, 1.5.56; Ov. *Met.* 14.410). In fact, Vergil himself includes dogs as a sign of Hecate's approach as Aeneas enters the underworld (*uisaeque canes ululare per umbram | aduentante dea, Aen.* 6.257-258).

Considering Vergil's models as well as his contemporaries, I argue that the barking of Hylax in the eighth *Eclogue* is not a sign of the return of Daphnis, but the approach of Hecate. The Vergilian speaker, unlike Simaetha, fails to recognize the dire omen of the dog's bark and so does not take the necessary apotropaic precautions against the coming of Hecate. Her inattention to, or ignorance of, the magical precedents on which she is modeled may well prove fatal. This more somber reading, however, lends a greater unity to the poem as a whole: just as Damon's song ends with the speaker's suicide (58-60) so Alphisiboeus' song ends with the speaker's impending doom. Such a reading also locates Vergil's *Eclogue* more firmly in the Latin literary tradition, in which magical rites are perilous and often ineffective. The failed ritual thus becomes a

commentary on the ultimate failure of a woman's attempt to usurp power through the gender-role reversal of magic.

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