

War Without End: Ecphrasis, History, and Anti-Militarism in Le Guin's *Lavinia*

*Lavinia*, Ursula K. Le Guin's retelling and reimagining of the second half of the *Aeneid* in the form of a novel, carefully adapts many identifiable passages of Vergil's Latin. They include two Vergilian ecphrases, the shield of Aeneas from book 8 of the *Aeneid* and the images in the palace at Laurentum in book 7. In the *Aeneid*, ecphrases such as these play a key role in tying Vergil's mythological subject matter to Roman history, and thus allowing the epic to function as social and political commentary (DuBois 1982). In particular, even as some sections of the poem evaluate war ambiguously or pessimistically, the ecphrases glorify it, treating it as a source of cultural pride and integrating it into a narrative of Roman history that begins with the early Latins and ends with the triumph of Augustus after Actium. Le Guin turns both ecphrases into denunciations of militarism using two strategies. First, the emotional reactions of the protagonist, Lavinia, treat the images of war as a source of fear rather than pride. Second, Le Guin's ecphrases dissociate war from Vergil's historical framework, instead representing it as a recurring phenomenon without a beginning or an end.

Vergil describes the images in the palace at Laurentum when the Trojans first arrive there early in book 7. Le Guin incorporates them into the description of Laurentum in Lavinia's account of her childhood (*Lavinia* 13). They include memorials of war in the form of trophies fastened to the doorposts (*Aeneid* 7.183-186). The *Aeneid* associates the trophies with pride by juxtaposing them with a positive portrayal of young Latin men's military exercises going on as the Trojans arrive (7.162-165). Le Guin's Lavinia reverses the emotive value of the trophies by reporting her childhood fear of them and the "grim" images.

The *Aeneid* makes the images part of a historical narrative framework by treating the founder figures whose portraits the war trophies accompany as early human kings of Latium. Thus, it encourages readers to see Roman militarism as a tradition passed down through the

continuity of Roman culture in time. *Lavinia* understands the founder figures as atemporal spirits. Thus, it dissociates the militarism of the trophies from historical specificities, undermining the role of military success as a source of cultural pride, and instead associates war with numinous powers that pervade all human existence.

Le Guin reworks Vergil's famous ecphrasis of the shield of Aeneas in a long flash-forward early in *Lavinia* (24-25). The *Aeneid* reports Aeneas's reaction to the portrayals of his future descendants' wars as wonder and joy (8.619, 729-731). *Lavinia* foregrounds its title character's reaction. Lavinia likes a few of the images, especially the peaceful picture of the she-wolf with Romulus and Remus, but her final response to the shield is tears of horror.

The greatest reason for Lavinia's horror lies in a notable extension that Le Guin makes to the history portrayed on Vergil's shield. Lavinia can see images on the shield that Aeneas cannot, continuing past the Augustan age into depictions of modern industrialized warfare ending with a mushroom cloud. This addition disrupts the structure of the Vergilian passage, which culminates in the triumph of Augustus at Actium, hinting at the hope that Rome's violent history will lead to a peaceful golden age under Augustus (DuBois 1982, Putnam 1965). The shield of Aeneas in *Lavinia* renounces the hope that war can lead to peace, instead giving a model of history in which war outlasts Rome and can end only with the destruction of the world.

*Lavinia*'s two extended engagements with Vergilian ecphrasis use similar strategies to alter the *Aeneid*'s depiction of war. Related strategies also operate in *Lavinia*'s treatment of Aeneas's descent to the underworld, confirming their importance to the role of violence in the novel. Even so, hints of optimism from the *Aeneid*'s ecphrasis of the shield and from the descent to the underworld reappear in Lavinia's perceptions of her son, Silvius, so that no model of history truly has the last word in Le Guin's book.

## Bibliography

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