

Gesander's Treatment of Defenseless Priests

(Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* 6.294-316) and the Epic Fate of Suppliants

Gesander's slaying of Aquites was in part modeled on Homer's *Iliad* 22 where Hector waits for Achilles and his parents address him (McClellan 2019). The scene reminds us of *Iliad* 24 where Priam asks Achilles to give back his son's corpse (Wijsman 2000b). Gesander is *alter Mezentius* (*Aeneid* 10, Wijsman 2000a). And Valerius contrasts this scene with the final duel of the *Aeneid* (Baier 2001). We need, however, to compare the scene to the overall traditional fate of suppliant fathers and sons in epic poetry.

Aquites is a priest who shows the insignia of his post just like Chryses does in the beginning of the *Iliad*. Apparently, there is no god who would punish Gesander or his people for his violation of the priest. And Chryses knows the whereabouts of his daughter and embarks on his embassy to Agamemnon while there is no battle being fought whereas Aquites is looking for his son right on the battlefield during the fight. As far as I can see, there are no such supplication scenes before Valerius. And just as in Homer suppliants in battle always die, Aquites is destined to be killed. If in Homer the victims are Trojans, they beg for their lives, if they are Achaeans, they do not (Stoevesandt 2004).

Aquites points Gesander's attention to his grey hair and thereby his old age. He asks Gesander to spare him and his son in memory of Gesander's own father. This scene thus evokes quite a few parallels especially in the *Aeneid*. There are the famous pairs of Pallas and Euander, Lausus and Mezentius, Turnus and Daunus, as well as Aeneas' role as protector of Pallas and his killing of Mago in *Aeneid* 10. We also think of Achilles and Peleus, of Achilles' role as the friend of Patroclus as well as of Hector and Priam in the *Iliad*. There is Adrestos in *Iliad* 6, who

wants Menelaos to let his father pay ransom for his son, and the Doloneia in *Iliad* 10. Horrifying is Neoptolemus as he kills Polites in front of his father Priam and then Priam himself at an altar in front of his wife in *Aeneid* 2. Gesander foresees that Aquites will be food for the dogs and thus denied a burial which could be a learned allusion to Eastern customs and at the same time a link to Achilles' treatment of Hector's corpse or to Polyneices.

The slaying of Aquites is the first death in a series during Gesander's aristeia. As he is supported by Mars, this series of killings reminds us of Hector's brief aristeia in *Iliad* 5.703-710 where he kills six Achaeans. Gesander's death ends his aristeia while Hector will not die in *Iliad* 5. Inserted in this aristeia is also a fight for a corpse and its weaponry which shows links to the fight for the corpse of Patroclus in *Iliad* 17. Gesander, however, will lose this fight.

Gesander does not have great importance for the plot. Valerius first and foremost shows that he is capable of writing epic scenes of duels and supplication in a new way. The Iazygian customs, which include euthanizing old people, are so different from what a Roman knows. Valerius seizes the opportunity to write a supplication scene that turns everything the reader expects about those scenes upside down. Unlike Mezentius, however, Gesander is portrayed as the noble savage (Manuwald 1999) who wants Canthus to bring home his message that he, i.e. the Iazygians, will not leave their homes and thus will not pose a threat. Canthus will not be able to deliver this message since Gesander kills him, but Valerius apparently alludes to contemporary politics. The Iazygians helped Vespasian in 69. Valerius may not have worked on the *Argonautica* long enough to see Domitian's problems with the Iazygians in 88/89.

Family and Roman identity matter (Maniotti 2016). Contemporary foreign affairs are addressed by the author. Imitation, emulation, and the hunt for a new twist on traditional material

enable the poet to comment on the work of his predecessors in terms of content and poetic form:
Flavian times were tough times in every respect.

Bibliography

T. Baier 2001: *Valerius Flaccus, Argonautica Buch VI. Einleitung und Kommentar*. Munich.

G. Manuwald 1999: *Die Cyzicus-Episode und ihre Funktion in den Argonautica des Valerius Flaccus*. Göttingen.

A.M. McClellan 2019: *Abused Bodies in Roman Epic*. Cambridge.

N. Maniotti 2016: Family in Flavian Epic, in: N. Maniotti (ed.): *Family in Flavian Epic*. Leiden, 1-13.

M. Stoevesandt 2004: *Feinde – Gegner – Opfer. Zur Darstellung der Trojaner in den Kampfszenen der Ilias*. Basel.

H.J.W. Wijsman 2000a: "Gesander alter Mezentius" (Valerius Flaccus 6.279-385), in: *Mnemosyne* IV 53.1, 58.70.

_____. 2000b: *Valerius Flaccus. Argonautica, Book VI. A Commentary*. Leiden.