The Labyrinth of War: The Troy Game and Military Deceit in Virgil's *Aeneid*

In *Aeneid* V's "Troy Game" (*Lusus Troiae*), the poet compares the complex maneuvers performed by boys on horseback to the deceit (*dolus*) of the Cretan Labyrinth (588-91). The mock battle also demonstrates tactical deception: rapid false retreats followed by reversals to attack, achieved by deliberately confusing movement (580-93). This paper will demonstrate how these tactics and their particular descriptive language reappear in the war of Books XI-XII, establishing the Troy Game as programmatic for later battle scenes. By exploiting a "language of deceit" conventional to Ancient Greek and Latin technical and historiographical descriptions of cavalry maneuver, the poet departs from Homeric models and incorporates contemporary forms of warfare into the *Aeneid's* epic combat (cf. Rossi 2004). Deliberate *dolus* in the *Aeneid* is often framed as morally objectionable and un-Roman, even for military purposes (Fratantuono 2010; Ganiban 2009; Abbot 2000). However, Virgil's use of a "language of deceit" for the epic's most important combat sequences blurs the line between tactical feint and moral deception.

The Troy Game can be understood in light of the increased strategic and symbolic importance of the Roman cavalry in the Augustan age. Julius Caesar's army faced skilled native cavalry abroad, learned their tactics, and incorporated foreigners as auxiliaries. The Augustan period saw an expansion of the cavalry (Davies 1989:141-51), and Augustus himself sponsored elite equestrian displays (Suet. *Aug.* 38; Taylor 1924). The wheeling maneuvers of the Troy Game are based on real training and displays attested earliest in Xenophon (*Eq. mag.* 3) and continuing through the Roman imperial period (Hyland 1990). Armed with spears, the boys wheel around and return their weapons to hostile position (*infestaque tela tulere,* 582; *spicula vertunt infensi,* 586): the same wheeling maneuver with spears used by Caesar's troops against

the Numidians (*BAfr*. 70) and similar to the "Cantabrian gallop" described in Arrian's *Tactica* (40.2-3). In describing the feigned retreat and wheeling typical of ancient cavalry charge (Speidel 1996:59), the poet develops a theme of deceptive and confusing movement: the Trojan boys "entangle their circles in other circles" (*alternosque orbibus orbis | impediunt,* 584-5) and "entangle their tracks in their course and conceal their retreat" (*vestigia cursu | impediunt texuntque fugas,* 592-3).

In the later battle scenes, the poet not only re-introduces this tactical language but greatly expands its scope. The language of deceit, concealment, and circular movement is applied to combatants on both sides, and can be framed positively or negatively. The skilled Camilla uses wheeling and encirclement to trick the Trojan Orsilochus: "Fleeing from Orsilochus, she rode in a great circle, eluded him within the circle and pursued her pursuer" (*Orsilochum fugiens magnumque agitata per orbem | eludit gyro interior sequiturque sequentem*, 11.695-5). She herself is bested by the negatively-framed *dolus* of Arruns, who ambushes her at a distance (11.759-65). Most innovatively, the poet expands this "language of deceit" beyond mounted combat. Aeneas displays his excellence in combat by matching the labyrinthine movements of his opponents. The disguised Juturna maneuvers Turnus' chariot in twisted circles (*tortos... orbis*, 490) to avoid Aeneas, who is ultimately able to follow trace her tracks. Finally, Aeneas' duel with Turnus demonstrates that he is both able to follow deceptive movement and to engage in it himself. The passage adds even more circularity to the intertext of Achilles chasing Hector around the walls of Troy (*Il*.22.208-251): *incertos implicat orbis*, 743; *mille fugit refugitque vias*, 753. The extended use of a "language of deception" for combat complicates the already difficult ending of the poem: Aeneas pursues and tracks Turnus in a way similar to the way Arruns tracks Camillia, but the poem's abrupt ending denies readers moral framing for this parallel. Virgil's

labyrinthine language suggests that war is an inherently deceptive space in which the Trojans must understand and mimic the deceptive tactics of their opponents in order to succeed.

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