

## Trans-(En)gendering Aeneas' Shield:

### Male-Female Chiasmus through Narrative, Intertext, and Ekphrasis in *Aeneid* 8

Ancient conceptions of art, even human biology, privileged men's active role in creation and relegated females to passive sources of material. But *Aeneid* 8.370-453, in which Venus seduces Vulcan to craft weapons for Aeneas, figuratively transgenders this programmatic act of creation to emphasize the generative, even heroic role of the feminine – with implications for our understanding of the shield ekphrasis (8.626-728) and Vergil's own poetic process.

Though *Iliad* 18.428-467 and 14.159-353 are this passage's most obvious comparanda (O'Hara 2018), Casali (2006, 2010) has explored Lucretian elements within Venus' seduction of her husband (8.370-406). Milnor (2005) and Lada-Richards (2006) have also conducted gendered readings of Vulcan's subsequent comparison to a housewife waking up early to spin wool (8.407-415). Taking inspiration from these and Quint's study of Vergilian chiasmus (2018), this paper offers a new narratological reading of this scene's narrative progression from feminine inspiration (370-388) to male submission (388-406) to matronly labor (407-415) to Cyclopean forge (415-453). The swift oscillation between male and female focalizations, like the alternating strokes and metalworking techniques (i.e., repoussé and chasing) that formed the shield, emphasizes the necessity of both sexes in creating art and even history.

This paper further examines a set of Lucretian-Vergilian intertexts that inscribe gender chiasmus deep within *Aeneid* 8, allusively masculinizing the feminine and feminizing the masculine. Vergil's Venus and Vulcan trade places, respectively, with Lucretian Mars and Venus (*DRN* 1.1-9, 32-40). Vulcan's description as *infusus gremio* (8.406), for instance, textually transgenders him at this seminal moment – pun intended – by reference to Lucretius' Venus

(*gremium*, *DRN* 1.33; *circum fusa*, 1.39). This frames Vulcan's cave as a uterine space (cf. *uteri*, *DRN* 5.808) where he and his Cyclopean midwives birth the shield conceived by Venus.

This feminized production narrative operates within the *Aeneid* much as Achilles' shield serves within the *Iliad* to conjure the world of peace behind the masculine war narrative. It also prompts further attention to women's (re)productive power on the shield itself. Cleopatra's opposition with Augustus at the head of her clamorous throngs (8.685-713) generates the *princeps*' own often-reproduced portrait presiding over multiethnic peoples (8.720-728; cf. *Res Gestae* 26-31 and Pandey 2018). And the female wolf that nurses and licks Romulus and Remus in alternation (*illam tereti cervice reflexa / mulcere alternos et corpora fingere lingua*, 633-634) takes Lucretian Mars' place mimetically and allusively (*suspiciens tereti cervice reposita*, *DRN* 1.34), placing feminine nurture above masculine genesis at the very foundation of Rome.

According to the *vitae*, Vergil described his own poetic process in similar terms: he likened himself to a mother bear licking her cubs into shape (*non absurde carmen se more ursae parere dicens et lambendo demum effingere*, *Vita Suetonii vulgo Donatiana* 22 ed. Ziolkowski and Putnam 2008). Aeneas' metaliterary shield, and Vergil's narratological and intertextual transgendering of its creation, prompt further inquiry into the gendering of artistic labor both in and by Vergil. This paper not only offers a new feminist reading of a key scene in the *Aeneid* but also opens new methodologies for recuperating the feminine within the all too masculine world of Latin literature.

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