

Divine Vision: Ekphrases in Vida's *Christiad*

Marco Girolamo Vida's *Christiad*, although not much studied today, was wildly successful in its own time. Originally completed in 1532 and published in 1535, three dozen editions were published in the 16th century alone (Warner 2005). By the end of the 19th century, 29 translations in 8 different languages were in circulation (Gardner 2009). The poem retells biblical stories in Latin hexameter verse, beginning with Christ's journey and entry into Jerusalem and ending with the resurrection and its aftermath. Like many of his contemporaries, Vida viewed the writing of such verses as heralding a revival of classical culture and thus strove to write as classically as possible, with Vergil as the primary model. With that in mind we see in the *Christiad* elements meant to stress the author's classical credentials: epic similes, ekphrases, and lines inspired by Vergil abound in the text. Although inspired by Vergil, Vida was not a slave to the model, and seems to be mostly detached from classical paganism and "almost to be translating the Vulgate into Vergil" (Gardner 2009, xvi). Concerning the ekphrases in the text, Di Cesare (1964) views the primary ekphrasis in the temple in Jerusalem as a successful innovation on the Vergilian model and "almost a symbolic miniature of the entire *Christiad*" (111). The other two, on the gates of heaven and in the tomb of Christ, Di Cesare finds to be less satisfactory (110). This paper will examine two of the ekphrases in the *Christiad* and suggest an interpretation of their importance to the text.

The first ekphrasis (1.581-724) occurs as Jesus and his disciples remain in the temple in Jerusalem after the cleansing of the temple, an episode occurring in the Synoptic Gospels. While the disciples examine the construction of the temple itself Jesus points to the carvings (*miras in marmore formas*, 582) on the ceiling of the temple, which it seems the disciples have not yet

seen; in a teaching moment the carvings are described through the eyes of Jesus and he tells his disciples that they foreshadow his death. This episode seems to echo Aeneas's viewing of the murals in the temple in Carthage, but the differences appear to carry more weight than the similarities (Di Cesare 1964). I argue that this temple ekphrasis serves a distinct purpose in the *Christiad*. The stories in the carvings stress the need for the miracle that readers know is coming later in the book: the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Furthermore, the teaching moment interspersed with the ekphrasis has some New Testament resonances, as Jesus redirects the attention of the disciples, who appear to have initially not focused their gaze upon what is important about the temple.

A second ekphrasis transpires near the end of the epic (6.349-367) when Mary Magdalene and her companions visit the tomb of Jesus and find it empty. In the empty tomb Mary marvels at the empty sarcophagus and the carvings (*videt ipso in marmore fictum*, 6.353) depicting a sea creature spitting up Jonah on a beach. I argue that this ekphrasis deliberately recalls the temple carvings in book one to provide a pair of bookended ekphrases for the miracle story of Christ. This time, the ekphrasis stresses the confirmation of the miracle, and reaffirms Christ's foreknowledge of the events through the story of Jonah with its resurrection parallels. Rather than being contrived (Di Cesare 1964), I suggest that the presence of this art and Mary's viewing of it is part of the miracle. Now that Christ has risen, even a viewer with mortal eyes such as Mary can view this art and interpret it as a sign of divine work.

Bibliography

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