

Ambiguities of Manhood in *Aeneid* 9

Epic was an important means for inculcating Roman ideals of manhood, but one that was not without its problems (Keith 2000: 11-12), for Roman manhood was a particularly fragile state that always required policing (Skinner 2014: 280-82). *Aeneid* 9 turns on the very issues that help define Roman masculinity, probing its successful constitution as well as, more urgently, its failures.

Warfare and competition have often been recognized as intertwined elements of constructing masculine identity in various cultural contexts, and they provide a backdrop for *Aeneid* 9 as well. The book's action takes place in a war, for example, and several key players have been earlier seen in athletic competition, military display, and sport hunting (Nisus, Euryalus, Ascanius). In fact, Book 9 provides the kind of adult proving ground of these youth-oriented activities, in much the same way that narratives of wartime heroism were linked in the English public-school context to excellence in team sports (Kanitkar 2017).

A troubling lack of fatherhood also marks the book. Aeneas is significantly absent for the entirety of Book 9 (Wiltshire 1999: 162), and Turnus' seldom mentioned father never appears in the poem at all. Nisus and Euryalus have already lost their fathers too. The central Nisus and Euryalus episode features Ascanius aping but failing to truly emulate his absent father—a failure shared by other Trojans—with disastrous results.

Roman manhood requires self-control and emotional restraint, but, throughout Book 9, words for desire and lust (*amor, cupido*) play a signal and problematic role. When the emotion wins out, disaster results: Nisus is impelled to act by a *dira cupido* (9.185) that on some level, he recognizes, each man makes into his own divinity, and Euryalus acts from an *amor laudum*

(9.197; Hardie 1994: 111). When Nisus realizes that he and Euryalus are going too far, he sees in his companion too great a desire for slaughter (*nimia caede atque cupidine*, 9.354; Hardie 1994: 137). Turnus could end the war singlehandedly once he gets into the Trojan camp, but a *caedis insana cupido* (9.760) keeps him from taking the correct action, and he is driven back.

The one apparently successful initiation to adult manhood is itself ambiguous (Keith 2000: 18-20, Rogerson 2017: 150-67), but this too shows the nature of fragile masculine identity in a Roman context. Taunted by the enemy Numanus Remulus as an example of an effeminate race, Ascanius kills him with an arrow. The symbolism of sexual penetration is clear: the one alleging effeminacy is shown masculinity in a graphic form. Following his successful shot, Ascanius wants to join the others on the battlefield, only to be restrained by Apollo and the older Trojan men, who provide a kind of paternity that his own father cannot. The one successful masculine action of the book also shows that masculinity requires cultural policing, and, in Ascanius' case, it shows that he is not quite ready for adulthood.

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