

Tricks and Treaties: The “Trojanification” of Turnus in the *Aeneid*

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In a poem characterized in large part by human intercourse with the divine, one of the most enigmatic augury passages of Virgil’s *Aeneid* occurs in Book XII, in which Juturna delivers an omen to incite the Latins toward breaking their treaty with the Trojans. The augury passage is, at a superficial level, a deceptive exhortation addressed to the Latins, but on a meta-textual, intra-textual, and inter-textual level, a foreshadowing of the downfall of Turnus and the Latins. In this paper, I will begin by illustrating how the deception within Juturna’s rhetoric and linguistic allusions to deception in the eagle apparition indicate a true meaning which supersedes Juturna’s intended trickery. Then, in demonstrating inter-textual and intra-textual paradigms for Turnus, I will explain how the omen, and the associations called for therein, actually anticipate Turnus’s impending, sacrificial death. Finally, I will address the implications of my claim, presenting an interpretation of a sympathetic Turnus and a pathetically deceived Juturna.

While the omen which follows is not necessarily false, Juturna’s rhetoric, spoken in the guise of Turnus’s charioteer Metiscus,¹ is marked by several rhetorical techniques that are, ultimately, fruitful in inciting the Latins toward combat. Attempting to invoke their better reason, Juturna begins the speech with several rhetorical questions that appeal to their sense of honor and their devotion to Turnus.² Her description of the Trojans as a *fatalis manus*, translated by Tarrant as “a troop protected by fate,”³ is most likely sarcastic, referencing what she deems a self-important insistence on prophecy from the Trojans. Conington correlates *patria amissa* on line 236 to Andromache’s use of *patria incensa* in Book III, line 325, perhaps suggesting a feminine rhetorical formula within the elided ablative absolute.⁴ Prompting Tolumnius and the Latins to rush forth into battle, Juturna’s rhetoric is certainly effective.

Linguistic allusions to deception within Virgil’s description of the Rutulians’ reaction suggest, however, that

Juturna herself is also deceived. Regarding the use of *incensa*, Tarrant notes that *incendere* “attains the status of a semi-technical term in Cicero’s oratorical writings, to describe the emotional effects of which he was so fond.”⁵ Her rhetoric, therefore, capitalizes on the upheaval of the Rutulians’ emotions. Aeneas also employs *incendere* in his rebuttal to Dido’s speech in Book IV: “Desine meque tuis *incendere* teque querelis.”⁶ From this line, in which Aeneas claims Dido’s rhetoric inflames both him and Dido, it follows that *incendere* inflames the emotions of both the orator and the addressee. In addition to the deceptive emotional arousal of Juturna’s rhetoric, the phrase *serpitque per agmina murmur* is marked by language of harm and deception. *Serpere* is etymologically related to *serpens*,⁷ and, as Tarrant notes, adopts a connotation of “spreading rumour” and is “a natural metaphor for harmful things.”⁸ Tarrant also points to Book II, line 269, in which *quies* and *dono divom gratissima* take the verb *serpit*, perhaps infusing it with a positive connotation. However, within the context of the passage, the *quies* ends up as an opportunity for the Greek soldiers, hiding out in the mechanical horse, to emerge and launch a surprise attack on Troy, a deceptive and ruinous “gift” for the Trojans after all. Associating the *qui* clause on line 241⁹ with a similar *qui* clause used by Virgil to describe Sinon’s trickery of the Trojans,¹⁰ Tarrant notes the pathos, rhetoric, and deception shared by the two passages. In the same way that Sinon’s gift is ultimately a gift, albeit a negative one, Juno’s omen likewise is a legitimate omen, the meaning of which has been debated.

In his article, *Two Passages from Book Twelve of the Aeneid*, William S. Anderson advocates an interpretation that the omen bears no veracity and is conjured up only to deceive the Italians, yet such an interpretation misjudges Virgil’s multilayered language of deception and interplay with previous similes. The obvious interpretation for a false omen, which Anderson supports, is that the eagle represents Aeneas, who, upon being hindered by the rest of the Rutulians, fails to snatch up Turnus, represented by the swan that is dropped by the eagle and falls into a river. Anderson constructs his argument from observations of Homeric auguries, contending that the Homeric

poems “do not offer any valid parallels for the omen,” as the omen is unlike Homeric auguries, in which “such natural events as the behavior of birds... are expected to be true, and hence they serve to foreshadow future events.”¹¹ Additionally, Anderson does not regard Juturna as capable of producing truly realized omens, arguing “When Zeus creates omens, he means them to point unflinchingly to the future... However, no effort to prove the likeness of Zeus and Juturna could succeed.”

The key to combating Anderson’s argument, then, lies in drawing parallels between the eagle apparition¹² and like similes within the *Aeneid* and the *Iliad*, the similarities of which reveal the deceptive nature of the omen. The closest parallel to the omen comes from Book XV of the *Iliad*, in which Hector, darting at the ships of the Greeks, is compared to an eagle chasing several different kinds of river birds.¹³ The two eagles even have similar adjectives modifying them, *fulvus* and αἶθων respectively. If this omen is taken as possessing some higher truth, then the eagle could not symbolize Aeneas, as Aeneas is ultimately successful in defeating Turnus. Also, an association between Aeneas and the markedly Trojan Hector is curious in a book in which, as Richard Thomas argues, Aeneas takes on the role of Achilles.¹⁴ Within an understanding of Aeneas as a second Achilles, an interpretation in which Aeneas parallels Hector is incongruent given the role-reversal.

Having established that Aeneas cannot be the eagle in an omen that accurately exhibits future events, the most plausible alternative interpretation lies in Michael Putnam’s analysis. In his article, *Tragic Victory*, Putnam argues that “the eagle is the feeling of hostility and violence roused by Juno against Aeneas and the Trojans.”¹⁵ Putnam arrives at this conclusion by citing an augury in Book I, ultimately a true foreshadowing, in which “Venus shows her son... twelve swans, who had also been the prey of an eagle under the open sky, who now seem to gain land in safety, in the same way as Aeneas’ ships, harassed by Juno and her followers, have come through their trial safely to the harbor of Carthage.” Taking Putnam’s argument into account, Juturna’s augury passage also contains elements indicative of a meta-narrative in which Virgil foreshadows the success of Aeneas and downfall of the Latins through an unaware Juturna.

Tarrant is keen to note that the phrase *vivusque per ora feretur*¹⁶ “has the sense ‘kept alive in memory,’” perhaps an allusion to the spread of Turnus’s fame through Virgil’s epic, convincing the Rutulians falsely that Turnus would live on in memory due to his success in battle.¹⁷ Putnam’s interpretation of the eagle as the wrath of Juno ties together the multilayered deception hinted at in Virgil’s language and the similes that elicit comparison to the omen.

Having expatiated on Putnam’s argument painting Aeneas as the swan and the wrath of Juno the eagle, there are several ways in which Turnus can be interpreted, all of them pointing to Trojan figures. In Book IX, Turnus, killing Lycus as he hangs from the wall of the Trojan camp, is compared to an eagle, killing either a rabbit, or, more relevantly, a swan.¹⁸ While Putnam argues that the wrath of Juno is the eagle, Turnus, being on the side of Juno, ought to be considered an exemplar of the eagle in the omen as well. After Aeneas has been understood as an Achilles figure, it would follow that, Turnus, Aeneas’ counterpart, is a Hector figure. The closeness of Hector and Turnus is strengthened by the *Iliad* Book XV simile in which Hector, heading after the Greek ships, is compared to an eagle chasing river birds. Turnus, likewise pursued but was unable to destroy the Trojan ships in Book IX before, like the swan in the Book XII simile, they fell out of his grasp and sank beneath the water.¹⁹ Finally, Hector dies at the hands of Achilles, while Turnus eventually dies at the hands of Aeneas. Both deaths spell out the impending loss of the army in each affair, forging an association between the Hector figure and devastation in war.

Perhaps Turnus’s character owes more to Laocoon, whose death and the episodes surrounding it contain many similar elements to the augury passage in Book XII. Both passages involve a nature omen, and are followed by hasty misinterpretations that lead to a major shift in combat. Turnus and Laocoon’s placement on altars substantiates their status as the ones performing a sacrifice, while Laocoon, killed by the snakes on the altar, represents a sacrificial victim as well. Turnus himself is not killed by the distant omen, but Juturna’s use of the verb *dovovere*, which Tarrant points out “evokes the Roman concept of *devotio*, in which an individual voluntarily endures

death to save his people,” foreshadows a later, perhaps sacrificial death.²⁰ In addition to *ara*,²¹ the verb *serpere* and the noun *agmen* likewise appear in both. The aforementioned *serpit* on line 239 of the augury passage is somewhat curious given that the succeeding omen features birds rather than snakes. Even more peculiar, however, is the appearance of *agmine* on line 212 of the snake passage, given that, according to the Lewis and Short Latin Dictionary, it applies, in general, to “a collected multitude.”²² The *Thesaurus Latinae Linguae* explains the use of *agmen* to describe only a pair of snakes by suggesting that it refers to the force or movement of the snakes’ bodies,²³ although it is also possible Virgil employed a lesser-known use of the noun to align it with other animal similes and the overall theme of war expressed in nature. The two uses in Book XII are clearer, referring to the battle lines of the Latins on line 239, and the flock of birds on line 249, clearly prompting an association between the birds in the omen and Turnus’s army.²⁴

The relationship between Turnus and Laocoon, however, is deeper than mere linguistic coincidences, and lies primarily in the similes used to describe them. Earlier in Book XII, Virgil compares Turnus to a bull,²⁵ playing eagerly in the sand before a battle, while Laocoon is compared to a wounded bull fleeing from an altar,²⁶ shaking an axe from its neck, which is curious given that Laocoon does not actually escape from the snakes. This simile recalls a simile at the beginning of Book XII in which Turnus is compared to a lion which breaks off the hunter’s spear which was lodged in its neck.²⁷ What is unclear, however, is why the lion is *saucius*. While it could refer to the weakened morale of the Latins before the arranged duel, it more likely is used to bear an association between Turnus and Laocoon. The bull captures the sacrificial nature of the two, but it does not explain why Laocoon’s bull escapes while Laocoon dies. The escape could suggest a transfer of the Laocoon paradigm, the ill-starred victim to whom a mighty omen is displayed, to Turnus.

One of the most enigmatic aspects of the augury passage, however, is the absence of Turnus, the alleged subject of the omen, in the words and actions throughout. In place of Turnus, the augur Tolumnius interprets the omen, misjudging it to favor the Latins. A silent, and therefore passive Turnus,

foregrounds Juturna as the active party within the passage. Juturna's delivering her brother from the duel provides another connection to the Laocoon passage. In lines, 229-230, she begins her speech asking, "Does it not shame you to throw away this one soul on behalf of this entire army?"²⁸ In encouraging the Latins to break the treaty, she disrupts and delays the course of the Laocoon paradigm, in which the Trojans simply look on as Laocoon and his two sons are killed by the snakes.²⁹ Virgil's play on the name of Tolumnius, which Tarrant argues "would almost certainly evoke memories of Lars Tolumnius of Veii, another treaty breaker,"³⁰ designates him the treaty breaker, much like Sinon's name designates him the deceiver,³¹ and thereby removes any culpability for the broken treaty from Turnus. Turnus addresses Juturna following Queen Amata's suicide,³² telling her that he recognized her artifice all along. Asking her if she came "so you might see the cruel slaughter of your wretched brother,"³³ he suggests that he knows that he must die, yet was markedly complacent and passive during the omen. The Turnus of the augury passage, as demonstrated by his Trojan counterparts Laocoon and Hector, faces unavoidable death, yet accepts his lot, drawing sympathy from the audience.

Much of Book XII is characterized by inversions of victims and victors, and likewise of Trojans and Greeks. Somehow, the vicious, confrontational warrior of the second half of the *Aeneid* becomes a passive, Trojan figure, while the Trojan hero comes to represent Achilles, the warrior who led the charge against his home city. While I do not deny an interpretation of the *Aeneid*, and in particular Book XII, which recognizes the fluidity of character roles, I argue that the inter-textual and intra-textual paradigms to which Virgil invites comparison in the eagle apparition signify and foreshadow Turnus' role within the book. It is difficult to envision Turnus as a Laocoon figure during his *aristeia*,³⁴ yet within the augury passage, Virgil leaves several textual clues that indicate Turnus's similarity with Trojan paradigms. Given the end of the Trojan War and the brutal death of Laocoon, the indirect Trojan characterization of Turnus within the omen draws immediate association to sacrificiality, death, and loss in war. It is a testament to the power of Virgil's poetry

that a passage which largely occludes Turnus unveils a new, seemingly inverted interpretation of Aeneas' rival.

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Notes

- ¹ Book XII, Lines 229-337.
- ² *Non...sumus* lines 229-231.
- ³ Tarrant, 149.
- ⁴ Connington, 427.
- ⁵ Tarrant, 151.
- ⁶ Book IV, Line 360.
- ⁷ *Lewis and Short Latin Dictionary* II.B.
- ⁸ Tarrant, p. 151.
- ⁹ *Qui sibi iam requiem pugnae rebusque salutem sperabant*
- ¹⁰ *Captique dolis lacrimisque coactis quos neque Tydides nec Larisaeus Achilles* (Book II, lines 196-198)
- ¹¹ P. 52 of the journal mentioned in the Works Cited section
- ¹² Book XII, line 244-256
- ¹³ *Iliad* Book XV, lines 690-695
- ¹⁴ P.278 of *The Isolation of Turnus*: “The relationship of Achilles and Aineas in the *Iliad*... reflects on that of Turnus and Aeolus – and Aineas – in the *Aeneid*.”
- ¹⁵ On p. 166 of his book, *The Poetry of the Aeneid*
- ¹⁶ 12.235.
- ¹⁷ Tarrant, 150.
- ¹⁸ 9.561-566.
- ¹⁹ 9.107-122
- ²⁰ Tarrant, 150.
- ²¹ 2.203, 2.223; 12.234.
- ²² Lewis and Short, I.A.
- ²³ TLL column 1340, lines 78-79.
- ²⁴ Tarrant, p. 153.
- ²⁵ Book XII, lines 103-107;
- ²⁶ Book II, lines 223-224
- ²⁷ Book XII, lines 3-8
- ²⁸ My translation in part derived from Tarrant’s note, p.149.
- ²⁹ Book II, lines 228-231
- ³⁰ Tarrant p. 155
- ³¹ James O’Hara, in his book, *True Names*, presents two possible instances of wordplay for Sinon’s name: either it derives from *sinus*, *sinuo*, etc. and is “linked to the image of the serpent,” or it is derived from the Greek verb σίνωμαι, which means to “harm” or “hurt.” (pp. 131-132)
- ³² Book XII, lines 632-649
- ³³ Line 636: *An fratris miseri letum ut crudele videres?*
- ³⁴ Approx. lines 311-382