

## Virgil's Pier Group

In this paper I argue that the ship race of *Aeneid* 5 presents a metapoetic commentary whereby Virgil re-validates heroic epic and announces the principal intertexts of his middle triad.

The games as a whole are rooted in transparent allusion to *Iliad* 23 and have, accordingly, drawn somewhat less critical attention than books 4 and 6. For Heinze (121-36), the agonistic scenes exemplify Virgil's artistic principles for reshaping Homeric material. Similarly, Otis (41-61) emphasized Virgilian characterization. Putnam (64-104) reads the games in conjunction with the Palinurus episode as a reflection on heroic sacrifice. Galinsky has emphasized the degree to which the games are interwoven with themes and diction in both book 5 and the poem as a whole. Harris, Briggs, and Feldherr have explored historical elements and Augustan political themes within the games. Farrell attempts to bring synthesis to these views by reading the games through a lens of parenthood themes.

A critical observation remains missing. Water and nautical imagery are well-established metaphors for poetry and *poiesis*. The association is attested as early as Pindar (e.g. *P.* 10.51-4). In regard to neoteric and Augustan poetics, it is sufficient to recall the prominence of water in Callimachus (*Ap.* 105-113). This same *topos* lies at the foundation of Catullus 64 and appears within both the *Georgics* and Horace's *Odes* (cf. Harrison). The *agones* of *Aeneid* 5 would be a natural moment for such motifs.

Virgil introduces all four ships as equals (114). Nevertheless, the Chimaera is conspicuous for its bulk and its three-fold oars (118-20). The contradiction highlights the potential metapoetic contrast between grand and small-scale epic. Her initial lead, bulk, and three-fold propulsion are all suggestive of Homeric verse (*Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and the cyclic "Homeric" poems). The Scylla follows close, suggesting a potential successor. Virgil

underscores the agonistic relationship: *melior remis sed pondere pinus tarda tenet* (153-4). The phrase both emphasizes Virgilian superiority and recalls Catullus' treatment of Homeric themes via a *pinea... texta* (64.10).

The *meta* is the heart of the metaphor. Gyas urges his pilot to avoid open water and stay nearer the shore, throwing him from the ship when he does not yield. Image and action are both evocative of Callimachus' Apollo. Like the Chimaera, the Homeric poems display a change of pilot or strategy (battle-glory to *nostos*). This disunity provides the critical opportunity.

Cloanthus holds to the inner course and pilots the Scylla into the lead, his victory ensured by *pietas* and not merely superior oars (232-43), a distinctly Virgilian theme.

Third and fourth place are equally suggestive. Mnestheus, like Cloanthus, passes the Chimaera on the inside. Comment on Apollonius seems likely here. Both ships surpass their bulky competitor by the same stratagems, suggesting kinship of poetic style. Free from the turn, he seeks open water (212), suggesting validation of heroic subjects such as war, if properly limited. His team's prowess, however, is not sufficient to outstrip divine favor.

The fourth ship crashes on the rocks when attempting this strategy, a sharp contrast. Context suggests an unexpected point of comparison. Virgil emphasizes the turbulent waters twice at the race's outset (*spumantia... litora* and *tumidis... fluctibus*, 124-6; *adductis spumant freta versa lacertis*, 141). His opening description of Actium (8.671-2) repeats this imagery, making the waters home to silver *delphines*, a well-known borrowing from the Ps.-Hesiodic *Scutum*. Moreover, upon its return, he compares Sergestus' ship to an injured, entangled, and fierce snake. The *Scutum* ecphrasis is replete with serpentine imagery.

We should note, however, that everyone receives prizes. Mnestheus and Gyas receive secondary prizes for placing; Sergestus, for salvaging his ship despite the damage. In so doing,

Virgil suggests his intent to honor and incorporate heroic materials from the former two corpora and to rescue the later from the rocks and incorporate it safely within the harbor of his own poetics.

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