

Between Intention and Interpretation:
The Baldric of Pallas in Vergil's *Aeneid* and Maffeo Vegio's *Supplement*

The baldric of Pallas is arguably the most important physical object in Vergil's *Aeneid* as well as one of the most difficult to interpret. The poet introduces the infamous belt with an ekphrasis describing the myth of the Danaids directly before Turnus strips it from Pallas' lifeless body in Book X. It then surfaces as the catalyst for Aeneas' jarring, violent slaughter of Turnus at the conclusion in Book XII. In these emotionally charged lines, the baldric of Pallas suddenly becomes a symbol for Aeneas' rage and, in turn, an underlying pessimism and ambiguity in Vergil's work as a whole.

While recent scholarship on Vergil has focused more on the epic's problematic and negative aspects, earlier readers were also sensitized to the poem's interpretive nuances. One such reader was the Italian humanist Maffeo Vegio, who wrote a 630-line neo-Latin hexameter *Supplement* to the *Aeneid* as a young law student at the University of Pavia in 1428 (Kallendorf 1999; Putnam 2004). Also known as *Book XIII*, Vegio begins where Vergil's epic ends as an exceedingly calm Aeneas addresses his defeated enemies over Turnus' corpse. In this opening speech the hero mentions that he will send Pallas' baldric back to his enemy's father, Evander, as a token of solace. This brief, neutral mention of the baldric encapsulates Vegio's aim in writing the *Supplement*. He hopes to complete the *Aeneid* as a morally unambiguous work, thereby highlighting Aeneas as a proto-Christ figure as he ascends to heaven at the conclusion of the *Supplement*. In order to achieve this goal, he attempts to sanitize the baldric of any negative associations that linger from the original poem (Putnam 2004).

In this paper I will explore how Vegio cannot escape the polyvalence of Vergil's text through his use of the baldric in the *Supplement*. His attempt to override the ambiguous nature of the baldric not only confirms his discomfort with Vergil's narrative, but it provides an

opportunity to examine the many possible interpretations of the baldric available to readers of both Vergil and Vegio. In fact, Vegio's *Supplement* reflects the baldric's shifting role in the *Aeneid*, as the object interacts with Vegio's text in unexpected ways.

I will begin by analyzing the ekphrasis of Pallas' baldric in *Aeneid* X.495-498.

Scholarship has long focused on how the myth of the Danaids relates to Vergil's narrative (Conte 1986; Putnam 1988). I aim, however, to explore the brevity of the ekphrasis, which only spans three lines and ten words. This compressed description, coupled with Vergil's emphasis on physically impressing (*imprimere*) the baldric, suggests that the object acts as a focalizing tool for Vergil's characters. As they come into contact with the belt, Turnus and Aeneas each imprint the baldric with their own associations and emotions. The baldric thus captures the multifaceted viewpoints represented in Vergil's epic (Conte 1986). Vegio directly responds to the baldric's ambiguity and narrative importance by remodeling its role in the *Supplement*. Instead of functioning as a catalyst for violence, the baldric symbolizes Aeneas' rightful vengeance of Pallas and clemency towards Evander. Vegio's effort to sanitize the baldric cannot fully succeed, because Vegio's educated audience carries the history of Pallas' baldric to the *Supplement*. The humanist in turn prompts his readers to either assume his pessimistic and problematic reading of the *Aeneid*, or to identify their own discomfort with Vegio's forceful imposition of closure on the open-ended text.

Bibliography

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