

Augustus, Ekphrasis, and the Shield of Aeneas

Virgil's Aeneid is widely recognized as Rome's ultimate foundation myth, conceived during the Principate to redefine Rome under Augustus' rule. Although the plot strictly deals with Aeneas' journey from the ruins of Troy to his victory of Turnus some seven years later, interspersed with the narrative are scenes which detail the entire history of Rome up to the Battle of Actium. In Book VI, we are introduced to nearly all of the famous men who played a critical role in Rome's history, from the Alban Kings to Romulus to Julius Caesar and Augustus himself. In Book VIII, more importantly, we receive "the story of Italy [and] the Romans' victories" from Vulcan in the form of an ornate shield.¹ Virgil's criteria for inclusion, his rhetorical purposes, and his literary techniques and allusions have all been discussed in detail by scholars for hundreds of years. This paper will attempt to synthesize a variety of articles and books written on these roughly 100 lines of the Aeneid and reach some general conclusion regarding Virgil's masterful ekphrasis.

In noting that the Shield of Aeneas is ekphratic in nature, it is first important to discuss the literary tradition available to Virgil. Immediately, two famous shields from Virgil's antiquity come to mind: the Shield of Achilles from the Iliad of Homer and the Shield of Heracles generally attributed to Hesiod (hereafter we will assume this is so). To first examine the Shield of Heracles (hereafter Shield), there is great similarity in the literary presentation. Riemer Faber notes many similarities in the metaphor and vocabulary used in Aeneid and the Shield of Heracles, necessarily a purposeful allusion by Virgil. Firstly, the use of electrum as a metal present in the construction of Aeneas' greaves mirrors the electrum present in Heracles' shield.²

¹Allen Mandelbaum trans., The Aeneid of Virgil: a verse translation (Toronto; New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 8.810-1.

²Riemer Faber. "Virgil's 'Shield of Aeneas' (Aeneid 8.617-731) and the 'Shield of Heracles'." Mnemosyne. Fourth Series, Vol. 53, Fasc. 1 (Feb 2000): 50.

Faber notes the ambiguity in the Greek ηλεκτρον—perhaps Hesiod is referring to amber—but regardless the allusion is to the Shield. Electrum does not make an appearance in the Iliad in any context, which allows for further comparison of the Shield and the Aeneid. Allusions to “solecism[s] in the Shield of Heracles” are replete in Virgil’s account, including the very limited, poetic use of *inardescit*, discussing a glowing brilliance due to the metals present in both shields.³ From this and the other examples presented in Faber’s analysis of the Greek and Latin texts, it becomes clear that Virgil drew much literary inspiration from the Shield.

Homer was likewise well known to Virgil, and the Aeneid is considered by many to be a pseudo-synthesis of Homer’s epic poems. The first six books of the Aeneid are likened to the Odyssey, the latter six to the Iliad. In Book XVIII of the Iliad, we find an episode superficially identical to Virgil’s. In both, the protagonist, requiring arms before he can enter battle, receives the finest work of Hephaestus/Vulcan; on the shield is inscribed a scene of incredible detail and beauty, described through both manufacturing and narrative means; the armaments are delivered to the hero by his divine mother. So in basic layout, we see that Virgil wishes his readers, who would also be well versed in Homer, to recall the Iliad in reading about the Shield of Aeneas. But this proves more to be where the Iliad and the Aeneid separate in subject matter, if not in epic literary style.

In the specific artwork depicted on the three shields lies stark difference. More than just an excuse to write elegant description, each ekphrasis speaks volumes about both the immediate scene surrounding it and the work as a whole. Without laboring too heavily on details, we can compare the content of the three shields.⁴ The Shield of Heracles is strictly apotropaic, featuring horrific scenes of warfare and destruction, with “adamant, unspeakable” Phobos, the fiery-eyed

³ Ibid., 51-3.

⁴ Details are drawn from translations by Evelyn-White (Heracles), Mandelbaum (Aeneas), and Murray (Achilles).

embodiment of Fear, at the center.⁵ The Shield of Achilles is almost pastoral in nature, with scenes full of peace and the joy of life surrounding the central image of the cosmos: earth and sea, sun and moon, and all the glorious stars of the constellations. The Shield of Aeneas, as stated earlier, is a selected history of the glory of Rome, with the key events of Rome's past surrounding Augustus, victor of Actium, in full splendor both on the prow of a warship and "at Phoebus' bright snow-white porch," overseeing the celebration of his triple triumph.⁶

First, we must examine the individual central images; in battle, the eye of the enemy would naturally be drawn to the middle of the shield before all else, and so too should our eye be drawn. Aeneas' shield seems to be a combination of those of Heracles and Achilles. The terror of Phobos is present via the fierce Battle of Actium, where even the immortal gods clashed. As Agrippa and Augustus stand bravely, both their heads gleaming with gold, Minerva, Neptune, and Venus, along with Mars and the Furies, help to repel the foreign army and gods at hand. The sea is stained red with the "strange bloodshed" of the battle, and even the natural order is upset as Virgil suggests that the "Cyclades [islands], uprooted" had joined the ships in the open sea.⁷ This is in total opposition to the Shield of Achilles, where serenity abounds and the omnipotent forces of nature feature in the center, more important than any human activity.⁸ Yet we see the appreciation of the divine in the Shield of Aeneas, too, with the aftermath of Actium. The specific connotation is certainly not identical, but its presence is important to note. We will discuss more of Augustus' triple triumph later when dealing with the political implications of the shield.

⁵ Hugh G. Evelyn-White, trans., "Shield of Heracles," in *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0128>, lines 140-5.

⁶ Mandelbaum, *Aeneid*, 8.938.

⁷ Mandelbaum, *Aeneid*, 8.899, 905.

⁸ It is pertinent to note many similarities exist between the Shield of Achilles and the Shield of Heracles, but this paper does not concern itself with those comparisons.

Compared to the work as a whole, Heracles' shield has a fairly immediate meaning: the obsession with warfare and strife is portentous of the blood to be spilled in the forthcoming battle between Heracles and Cycnus, son of Ares. The extant Shield of Heracles is not a lengthy work, and much of it is taken up by this one ekphrasis and we need not spend too much time worrying over it. The Shield of Achilles, despite being only a small scene in 24 long books of the Iliad, is of utmost importance in understanding Homer's true (or more accurately, widely-believed) purpose in writing. It is curious that in a work with many ekphrases, most of which are similar in design to the horror of the Shield of Heracles, the protagonist's shield is so relatively peaceful. In the reading of the Iliad, it is easy to take the poem as extolling the glory of warfare and the honor of dying early but valiantly. But the shield of the hero, the man whose anger is central to the Iliad and the fate of the Trojan War, is hardly apotropaic and glorifies that lifestyle which many of those at Troy will never attain. It is exactly this tragedy that Homer wishes to underscore: to die young in war is to lose all the joy of peace. Achilles will never, for example, celebrate marriage, as the figures on his great shield will; its protection is insufficient in the face of brutal war to guarantee Achilles his place among the $\nu\omicron\sigma\tau\omicron\iota$. This message becomes painfully evident in the final moments of the Iliad, most notably as Achilles and Priam weep together, Priam for Hector, so recently killed, and Achilles for Peleus, who will also bury his son when Achilles meets his inevitable death. In that moment, the Trojan War is overshadowed by tragedy of life cut short before its prime. But even above this tragedy, the cosmos in the center of the shield emphasizes that, as E. T. Owen writes in The Story of the Iliad, "though Troy may fall and Achilles' life be wrecked, the world goes on as before."⁹ The greater order, the literal Greek notion of $\kappa\omicron\sigma\mu\omicron\zeta$,

⁹ (Quoting Owen) Oliver Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles within the 'Iliad'." Greece & Rome. Second Series, Vol. 27, No. 1 (April 1980): 12.

remains central and always preserved. Without the scene of the Shield of Achilles, none of this would be nearly so evident, and much depth to the work would be lost.

With the significant contribution of Achilles' shield to the Iliad in mind, we now turn to the Shield of Aeneas. This shield, too, does not seem solely to confirm the rest of the Aeneid and reinforce the glory of Rome. There are many competing theories on the true nature of this shield. The earliest theory, put forth by G. E. Lessing in 1776, suggested that the Shield of Aeneas was pure propaganda, and Virgil utterly fails to create "a shield worthy of a divine workman," such as the Shield of Achilles.¹⁰ Later critics, giving far much more credit to Virgil's beautiful verses, have qualified this early view, believing that "Aeneas [is] the complementary figure to Augustus."¹¹ Thus Virgil's task in Books I-VI to rid Aeneas of his cowardice and his overruling passions and his subsequent transformation into the paradigm of a founding hero is reflected in Augustus. Aeneas is *insignem pietate virum*, and therefore Augustus must also be.¹² This calls to mind yet a fourth relevant shield, that being the historical golden shield given to Augustus by the Senate, praising him for his *virtus, pietas, clement, and iustitia*. This theory is supported by David West, but as S. J. Harrison points out, these categories are insufficient for some of the episodes selected by Virgil, mostly notably the infancy of Romulus and Reus.¹³ Harrison prefers (with reservation) Warde Fowler's opinion, which suggests that the scenes are comprised of "escapes from perils both moral and material."¹⁴

It is impossible to say with any certainty what theory is closest to Virgil's unknowable intention, but some combination of these seems the best fit. Since it is commonly believed that

¹⁰ (Quoting Lessing) Robert Gurval, Actium and Augustus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 210.

¹¹ (Quoting Vinder) Ibid., 211.

¹² J. B. Greenough ed., Bucolics, Aeneid, and Georgics Of Virgil. (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1900), <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0055>, 1.10.

¹³ S. J. Harrison, "The Survival and Supremacy of Rome: The Unity of the Shield of Aeneas," The Journal of Roman Studies. Vol. 87 (1997): 70.

¹⁴ Ibid. (quoting Fowler).

Virgil had access to Livy's first pentad at the time of his writing, it is appropriate that he holds with Livy's account of the Regal Period. The shield features seven scenes in total: three from the Regal Period, three from the Republic, and one final and central scene from the nascent Principate that we have discussed with some detail. I will not spend too much time on Virgil's brilliant wordplay and the mastery with which he crafts these episodes, but rather why they are picked and their relative symbolism, especially where Augustus is concerned. To do this, I will utilize at great length the complementary critiques of Harrison and Robert Gurval. Gurval does not fall strictly into any of the aforementioned categories, but his unique approach will prove instrumental in my analysis.

To start, we have the episode of the *lupa* and the twins. This scene is an absolute necessity for any complete account of the foundation of Rome, and it is not too noteworthy. Following this, skimming over (as Gurval notes) the conflict between Romulus and Remus, is the full account of the rape of the Sabine women.¹⁵ Unlike the previous episode, Virgil lays out the rape, committed "against all law" (*sine mores*), and moves to the outbreak of war which is almost immediately resolved by peace between Romulus and Tatius, surprisingly described as *senex*.¹⁶ Gurval tells us that Tatius is never *senex* in other extant traditions.¹⁷ Next comes a surprise, namely the horrific punishment of Mettus Fufetius. A scene that Livy describes as *tanta foeditate spectacula*, this one moment is perhaps the most distracting and incongruous of the entire shield.¹⁸ In looking at our previous hypotheses concerning the purpose of the Shield, it is difficult to reconcile this gruesome scene with the four cardinal virtues. Harrison, agreeing with Fowler and justly using Livy's account suggests that this is representative of a peril overcome,

¹⁵ Gurval, *Actium and Augustus*, 219.

¹⁶ Mandelbaum, *Aeneid*, 8.823.

¹⁷ Gurval, *Actium and Augustus*, 219. He argues further on this scene, but is it not too illuminating.

¹⁸ Valerie M. Warrior, trans, *The History of Rome, books 1-5*, (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 1.28.11.

that Mettus' treachery—breaking the alliance between Alba and Rome and withdrawing military support during the “crucial battle with Fidenae and Veii”—could have resulted in Alban domination of Latium.¹⁹ But Gurval is quick to counter this point, pointing out that Alba Longa is populated by descendants of Aeneas, and that Mettus Fufetius himself is a direct descendant of Aeneas!²⁰ Combining this with the particularly graphic language Virgil uses throughout the episode should, in Gurval's opinion, leave the reader “with greater horror and revulsion”.²¹

How can we justify this within the greater scope of the foundation of Rome? To suggest an original theory, this pseudo-parricide has strong ties to other events of the Regal Period. In Livy, Romulus kills his brother and from the murder springs Rome proper, though it is still somewhat undeveloped. The episode of the Curiatii and the Horatii, too, contains parricide, when Horatius slays Horatia for her admittedly inappropriate public display of mourning.²² Again, Horatius (in the end) is unpunished, and new conventions for justice are formed regarding public appeal. In a small way, too, the *paterfamilias* is reaffirmed, as Livy attests that had Horatius been truly guilty, “[Horatius' father] would have exercised his right as a father to punish his son himself.”²³ After this in Livy we have the episode of Mettus Fufetius, and later (though absent from the *Aeneid*) Servius Tullius is assassinated by his son-in-law and his daughter, which leads to Tarquinius Superbus' cruel reign, but ultimately provides the impetus for revolution and the intuition of the Republic.

The next episode, the threat of Porsenna and the reinstatement of the monarchy, Gurval ties unequivocally to the principle of *libertas*.²⁴ Harrison has nothing particularly novel to add to

¹⁹ Harrison, “Survival and Supremacy,” 71.

²⁰ Gurval, *Actium and Augustus*, 223.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Warrior, *History of Rome*, 1.26.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Gurval, *Actium and Augustus*, 223.

this, except portraying more in the light of a peril to the city resolved through the courage of the *Aeneadae*. Following is an extremely confusing and convoluted account of the Gauls' assault on Rome. Much is written on this scene, but one detail seems important above the rest.²⁵ Though we see Manlius defending the citadel, the true hero of the story, Camillus, is noticeably absent. To Camillus were "bestowed the titles of father of his country and second founder of Rome" for his actions during the Gauls' attack and his defense of Rome as the capital of the Republic.²⁶ If he was so respected, why has Virgil chosen to omit him? Scholars are curiously reticent to address this, only remarking that he is a common element of the entire episode, which only serves to make the question event more important. Furthermore, Manlius met a shameful end, thrown from the Tarpeian Rock, quite near to that which he defended so honorably.²⁷ However, according to Livy, Manlius' actions to cause his execution were pro-plebeian in nature; though he had been consul and at the heart of patrician society, his sympathies lay with the common man.²⁸ It is then very possible that Virgil's inclusion of Manlius gives us a hint of Virgil's alleged Republic sympathies. The idea that Augustus the Principate is not Virgil's ideal will rear its head again.

Before Actium, Virgil chooses to move from the solemnity of the matrons' procession to Tartarus, examining two famous men of the late Republic. Catiline, author of a potentially fatal conspiracy "to burn Rome to the ground," is tormented by the Furies.²⁹ In opposition is Cato, a lawgiver in the Underworld. Catiline's purpose is clear: he would have destroyed Rome itself, the culmination of so much effort from so many famous men. His presence brings to mind the relatively modern "forces of discord and civil conflict" that were stopped with Augustus'

²⁵ Gurval and Harrison make note of other details, but I will attempt to demonstrate the unique nature of one in particular.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

²⁷ Warrior, *History of Rome*, 6.20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.14-20.

²⁹ Harrison, "Survival and Supremacy," 74.

victory at Actium. Cato is somewhat trickier to deal with. Though a few Catos lived around the era of Catiline, only one, Cato the Younger, was so instrumental in his execution. This Cato also openly opposed Julius Caesar, and proclaimed that he would rather die than live under the tyranny of Caesar. While Gurval states that it is “simplistic and misleading” to take this as a “bold manifestation” of Virgil’s Republican sympathies, I do not believe it can be discounted completely. His arguments are somewhat muddled and contradictory here; Gurval suggests that praise of Cato is “not unique in contemporary poetry,” yet he must be juxtaposed with the villainous Catiline to “extol the vanquished opponent of Caesar.” Though Virgil is a master of subtlety and by no means blunt, attempting both to insult and to praise Cato in one breath is a little contrived. This argument seems too complex and perhaps over-analytical.³⁰

Finally, we see the apex of the ekphrasis, the Battle of Actium itself. First, a common image from the Shields of Achilles and Heracles makes a startling appearance. A “swollen sea” appears *haec inter*, which echoes the rim of Ocean present in the other two shields, though the ambiguity of the Latin makes it difficult to ascertain whether the Ocean surrounds the entire shield or just the central Battle of Actium. It is tedious to rehash all the poetic detail with which Virgil embellishes this scene; instead, we will look immediately to its treatment by scholars, omitting significant discussion of the Latin text.

The scene receives distinctly different treatment by Harrison and Gurval. Harrison, against emphasizing the theme of peril averted, recalls an episode of Camillus that featured briefly before. Previously, around the era of the Gallic sack of Rome, Camillus had persuaded the citizens of Rome not to migrate to Veii and establish a new capital. Likewise here, should Mark Antony have succeeded, it was likely that the seat of power would have moved to

³⁰ Gurval, *Actium and Augustus*, 229.

Alexandria, where Mark Antony had long resided with his (*nefas*) *Aegyptia coniunx*.³¹ This would have effectively removed the splendor of Rome, and the Empire (for the Republic was certainly dead) would be ruled by a barbarian queen and a traitor. After Augustus' victory over the barbaric peoples, he dedicates "three hundred shrines" and "slaughtered steers ... before the altars" to the gods.³² Here, at the end of the ekphrasis, the piety of Augustus is reinvigorated, a final push to solidify the link between Aeneas and Augustus. The description of the celebration, which must have been legendary by the time of Virgil, would fill the reader with national pride. Finally, the subjugation of the "far-flung dangers" shows once and for all that Rome is truly the capital of the world, with only a few "future perils" for Augustus yet to conquer.³³

Gurval takes an extremely different approach to the episode. He asserts that the description of the battle lends, ultimately, a political context for Actium that was previously unappreciated. More than just a single battle in the modern era, Virgil "places [Actium] as the culmination of a long series of wars and Roman triumphs."³⁴ But he also notes, very perceptively, that this does not set a clear connection between pious Aeneas and Caesar Augustus. Virgil, in the style of Homer before him, succeeds in complicating what we originally took as an epic of Roman nationalism and Augustan propaganda. In Homer, the glory of dying in battle is tempered with the promise of a long life of joy and pleasure; in Virgil, the glory of Rome is tainted by "cruel violence, irrational strife, and individual sorrow."³⁵ No matter the triple triumph, it comes on the heels of bloody strife and civil war; as Gurval says, "even the establishment of peace and Augustan rule cannot remove" the recent violence within Rome

³¹ Harrison, "Survival and Supremacy," 75; Greenough, *Aeneid*, 8.688.

³² Mandelbaum, *Aeneid*, 8.932, 936.

³³ Harrison, "Survival and Supremacy," 75.

³⁴ Gurval, *Actium and Augustus*, 244.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

itself.³⁶ When Aeneas gazes upon Vulcan's craftsmanship, after all is said and done, he "is glad for all [the] images, though he does not know what they mean."³⁷ Aeneas here is *ignarus*, and because he does not understand the full context of the history, he rejoices at the marvels of Rome. But the reader, knowing well what he is viewing, cannot so readily rejoice; he recognizes violence and sorrow, which Virgil will make more plain by pitting Aeneas and Turnus, leaders of two people who will later become one Italy, into savage pseudo-civil war.

From this episode of the Shield of Aeneas, we can see both a proud literary tradition and thorough history laid bare in brilliant ekphrasis. Homer and Hesiod are called upon to lend their beautiful imagery and metaphor, and Homer in particular is responsible for the unbelievable complexity contained in this brief moment in literature. And Virgil, though we may never know his true intention, has left us with a political commentary and account that scholars have debated for hundreds of years. Does Virgil hold Augustus as the true shepherd of a Golden Age for Rome, or is he merely the victor of an unnecessary civil war born out of Caesar's brief tyranny? There is certainly sufficient evidence for these and any of the myriad readings of the Aeneid over the two thousand years because, ironically, Virgil's own order to destroy the work was fortunately ignored. But what is certain is that this account of Aeneas' shield cannot be read as a random selection of events, as some critics will incredibly assert. At the very least, the care with which it was crafted has been made apparent, and the reader will appreciate the near-impenetrable web of suggestion, allusion, and subtlety that Virgil has left us, albeit unbeknownst to him.

³⁶ Gurval, Actium and Augustus, 245.

³⁷ Mandelbaum, Aeneid, 8.952-4.

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