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The Politics of Art: The View of Actium in the *Aeneid*

By Kyle Painter

When Augustus took control of Rome, he used several means to gain power. One of these was, of course, military force. However, after Antony and Cleopatra were defeated, Augustus had to find ways to keep his power without keeping a large military at his constant disposal. The major way that he was able to do this was through controlling the public's view of himself through various means of propaganda. As Paul Zanker has shown, Augustus used very effectively the power of symbolic images, located on coins, buildings, and statues to manipulate popular opinion. Using such tools, he was able to control the underlying ideology of the public, making them believe that he was their savior from the enemies of the republic.

Another art form which historians see as playing a factor in Augustus' attempt at ideological control is poetry. There were three famous poets of the Augustan era, Horace, Propertius, and Virgil, and all three praised their emperor. However, it is a question of historical debate as to how much autonomy these poets had. Many historians claim that these poets were virtually pawns of Augustus, writing praises to him just like his artists made sculptures to exalt him. However, literary critics have asserted that there is a certain amount of freedom from Augustus within the work of these poets. This study will focus only on Virgil and his epic, the *Aeneid*. I will first discuss more general issues involving the *Aeneid* and its political and poetical significance, and then proceed to analyze as a test case the portrayal of the Battle of Actium found in Book 8 and compare it to the pro-Augustan propagandistic history of Cassius Dio to see how close are these two views of this very politically charged topic.

Virgil uses several means of commenting on Augustus in the *Aeneid*, but one of the most spectacular of them is found on a shield

fashioned by Vulcan for Aeneas. The shield contains a series of vignettes of Roman history, including such events as the rape of the Sabine women, the she-wolf with twins Romulus and Remus, and the punishment of Catiline. In the center of the shield is the Battle of Actium, in which gods are seen helping to determine the outcome of this decisive battle.

Many of the earlier modern interpretations of Virgil's *Aeneid* focused on its political ramifications. In 1776, G. E. Lessing stated that this shield is "an interpolation, intended solely to flatter the pride of the Romans" (qtd. in Gurval 210). He went on to say that the shield used by Virgil was only a copy of a comparable shield made by Homer; the implication is that the copy, since it has so little originality, must exist for the purpose of promoting Augustus and the ideal of Roman-ness. Lessing tends to see Virgil as a tool for Augustan propaganda. Although recent critics have been less abrupt in their assertions of the *Aeneid's* political interpretations, they still see a vital link between Virgil's epic and Augustus.

Some critics have wanted to see Aeneas as a prototype for Augustus. Virgil, writing in the time when Augustus was creating a new form of government, identifies Augustus with the mythical founder of the city of Rome. Mary K. Thornton notes that "[i]t is generally agreed that one of Vergil's major tasks in the *Aeneid* is to glorify Augustus but alas the poet has a problem: he must portray Aeneas, the surrogate for Augustus, as a Roman hero" (566). Her argument is that Virgil had to create a mythical Aeneas that suited the historical Augustus. The "problem" that she mentions is that Augustus was a good administrator but had a reputation as a terrible fighter. Her contention is that Virgil manipulated the character of Aeneas in order to fit the real-life Augustus. For example, in book 7 Virgil "makes [an] insignificant incident the cause of a war," implying that war is an insignificant act, therefore Augustus need not worry about not being known as a successful general (567). By belittling any of the weaknesses that Augustus may be accused of within the fictional Aeneas, Virgil is promoting Augustus.

One possible weakness to this kind of argument is that there cannot be a one-to-one correspondence between the Trojan and the Emperor. Adam Parry illustrates this problem well when he demonstrates how Aeneas could be seen as a representation for Antony. In

book 4, Aeneas is romantically connected to Queen Dido of Carthage. The love affair that Dido and Aeneas have is akin to that between Cleopatra and Antony (Parry 65-66). If this was a work meant to idealize Augustus in the person of Aeneas, then Virgil would not have included a view of Aeneas as Augustus's worst enemy. We simply cannot accept the argument of such a narrow correspondence.

However, some critics have emphasized the political ramifications of the *Aeneid* by looking at the scenes that actually recount recent history, including the Battle of Actium, which I will discuss later. These critics recognize that some amount of politics within Virgil's writing is not surprising. R.J. Tarrant claims that "it would have been astonishing had he not [spoken on politics], given his literary stature and circumstances" (170). Such a talented poet with close connections to Augustus could not really avoid writing on political themes. Because of this connection, Virgil has often been interpreted in light of the view of Augustus. Tarrant says that "the more positively Augustus is judged, the easier it becomes to construe the *Aeneid* as a celebration of his rule, whereas if Augustus was in fact nothing more than an especially crafty tyrant ..., Virgil's praise of his regime becomes an embarrassment" (185). Basically, Tarrant is saying that assessment of the political connection between Virgil and Augustus has been emphasized or almost denied on the basis of that particular critic's view of Augustus. Tarrant himself realizes that Virgil was not the writer that Augustus, the "master of propaganda," would "have hoped for" in order to further his propagandistic campaigns, because Virgil does not blindly extol Augustus's praises (186). In saying this, Tarrant is anticipating the arguments for a more artistic view of Virgil's poetry.

Other critics have tried to diminish the political overtones by focusing on the literary elements of the *Aeneid*. Robert Alan Gural, in his book *Actium and Augustus*, maintains that Virgil kept a certain amount of distance from Augustus. He states, "Whatever significance Augustus attached to Actium in his political ideology and public image, it cannot be found in the poems of Horace, Vergil, and Propertius. Or at least it should not be rashly interpreted to have been the impetus for the poetic compositions" (136). If these poets offer praise to Augustus, which they all do at times, it is not because Augustus has specifically employed them to write in his honor. Gural realizes the political impli-

cations of Virgil's text, but he also tries to separate it from Augustus's control. He sees the *Aeneid* as "serv[ing] more to mold a new "Augustan" conception and ideology of the Actian victory than to endorse or transmit any prior propaganda of the battle" (213). Gurval wants us not to bias our interpretation of the *Aeneid* with preconceived ideas on the nature of Virgil's relationship with Augustus. Another critic, Katherine Toll, also wants to find an alternate path of interpretation as she shows how the *Aeneid* was one of the forces that helped to "make Roman-ness" (34-56).

The question of whether we interpret based more on political or literary criteria is still up for debate. I will now consider that question by examining the view of Actium on the Shield of Aeneas and compare it to pro-Augustus propaganda written by Cassius Dio. After Virgil recounts several of the important events in Roman history that appear on the shield, he proceeds to describe the middle of the shield, which contains the scene of Actium. First he describes Augustus and his army:

Augustus led the Italians into battle
with Senate and people, with gods both small and great.
He stood in the sternsheets. Flame poured from his brows
exultant; above him dawned his father's star.
Elsewhere, Agrippa, blessed by gods and winds,
swooped down with his fleet. (8.678-683)

It is important to note who is with Augustus as he is entering battle. He is accompanied not only by the Italians and the Senate, but also by all manner of gods. Later we find that Minerva, Neptune, Venus, Mars, and especially Apollo, all of them major players in the Roman pantheon, are all backing Augustus, fighting for his eventual victory. The people with him are of Italian lineage, and his top general Agrippa accompanies him. In addition, his adopted father, Julius Caesar, seems to have taken on divine attributes, being placed in the heavens as a star. All of this emphasizes the utter Roman-ness of Augustus.

In contrast to this, we have the view of the opposition:

There Antony, like some savage, gaudy sheik,
hero of Araby and the Sea of Pearls,
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol13/iss1/8>

led Egypt, the lords of the East, and Bactria;
 behind him (God forbend!) his Gypsy Queen. (8.685-88)

Antony is given his due for previous victories, but what Virgil gives him in one line, he takes back in the next by casting him as the leader of "Egypt, the lords of the East, and Bactria," and later, as Virgil adds, the Sabaeans. It was typical to associate Antony with the East, and Virgil was no exception. The main god we see helping the Egyptian side is the dog Anubis. Not only is Antony associated with Egypt and its gods, but the god pictured is a mere dog (accompanied by "[w]eird gods, fantastic shapes" (8.698)) compared to the Roman gods in human form.

Then there is Cleopatra, the "Gypsy Queen." She is never mentioned by name, but she does seem to have more power than Antony. In fact, Antony is basically a figurehead according to this portrait, as all the actions performed by Egyptian force are ordered by her. She "rang her gong for battle stations" (8.696), but that proving unfruitful she "prayed for a wind" and escaped south toward Egypt (8.707). After the initial view of Antony at the head of the Egyptian force, he is not even alluded to. As Gurval puts it, "[W]hile the epic poet does not omit Antony's name and relegates the role of the Egyptian queen to companion..., he also painstakingly avoids any overt mention of Roman participation and civil war" (263). This has the effect of making Egypt, with Cleopatra as its leader, seem like the real enemy. This is very fortunate for Augustus, who can now receive a triumph for having defeated Egypt, not a partially Roman force led by Antony. Even though Antony is somewhat Egyptianized, he remains a Roman, and so cannot be seen as the primary leader of the Eastern forces.

Cleopatra's eventual end is described like this:

Amid the carnage Vulcan had carved her pale
 with impending death, riding the wind and wave.

And there, to the south, the Nile, grief-stricken ... (8.709-711)

She seems pitiful, being pale and grief-stricken from the knowledge of her imminent demise. Gurval notes that the former royal sails which she had used in battle are gone as she escapes from Actium (270). He also notes that "there is also not the final touch of dignity that Horace lavishes on the defeated enemy at the end of his Cleopatra Ode" (271).

Instead, we witness a rather pathetic end to a once noble life, an end which we barely get time to hear about as the narrator quickly transports us to Augustus' triumph in Rome.

Overall, the shield is obviously slanted toward Augustus, but not more than might be expected. Augustus does get a triumph for winning the battle, but not because of any decisive move made by him. It is actually the gods that get most of the credit for the victory. In fact, Augustus thanks the gods by giving them lavish gifts when he gets back to Rome. Cleopatra in the end is not as vilified as we might expect, only shown to be weak and ineffectual in battle. It seems that the primary effect of this scene is not to lift up Augustus and to tear down Antony and Cleopatra, but rather, Virgil is showing us what it means to be a Roman. Augustus may figure into that explanation, but he is not really the cause or embodiment of the Roman ideal. It seems that Virgil has created a text that does praise Augustus, but which does not lift him up nearly as much as it could have.

In contrast to Virgil's description of Augustus, Cleopatra, and Actium is that of Cassius Dio. Cassius Dio was a third century official who, after serving under several emperors, decided to write a history of Rome. The government in his day was extremely corrupt in his view, so in his history he looks back to Rome's former glories. Augustus is seen as a savior of Rome, a restorer of the monarchy, even though the emperors refused the title of "king" (Millar 74). In fact, at one point, Dio says that the Romans were "robbed of their democratic form of government," but we know that he was actually in favor of the principate, so this robbing action of Augustus was seen as a good thing (Dio, Cary 5.435). Since he saw Augustus this way, Dio was prone to allow his own opinions of the first emperor to color his history. Many of the distortions that Augustus promulgated through his own propaganda scheme were preserved in Dio. Consequently, in Dio we have a very good source of pro-Augustus propaganda that we can compare to Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Dio, in a manner similar to Virgil, goes out of his way to associate Antony with Egypt. While Antony is fighting in the East, he gains monetary support from Cleopatra. However, she affects him much more than that, as we see that as early as 36 B.C., Antony "became more than ever a slave to the passion and the witchery of Cleopatra" (Dio, <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol13/iss1/8>)

Cary 5.409). It was a fruitful affair that produced at least three children. Dio's emphasis on the children is one of the signs that he is identifying Antony with Egypt instead of Rome. This identification is intensified when Augustus declares war on Egypt. Augustus is careful not to include Antony in the declaration, but Dio says, "These proceedings were directed formally against Cleopatra, but in reality against Antony" (Dio, Scott-Kilvert 38). Dio clearly wants to see Antony, the enemy of Augustus' republic, as part of the enemy Egyptians.

One problem that Dio has that Virgil does not is that Dio is writing a history, which is supposed to contain some amount of "facts," most of which could probably have been checked by his contemporaries. Therefore, he cannot rid Antony of all his Roman ties, as there are some senators and consuls that defect to his side (whereas in the *Aeneid*, the only senators were with Augustus) (Dio, Scott-Kilvert 37). In addition to this, Cleopatra had as a bodyguard a group of Roman soldiers who "had her name inscribed upon their shields" (Dio, Scott-Kilvert 38). What we end up seeing is not simply a lack of details on Antony's Roman origin, such as we see in the *Aeneid*, but a portrait of what happens when Roman-ness is spoiled by an outside force, in this case Cleopatra. She subjugated and "enslaved" him, even to the point where he would walk behind while she was being carried on a litter (Dio, Scott-Kilvert 38). Dio claims that "she deprived him of his wits," so it should come as no surprise that the speech by Augustus before Actium declares that Antony is no longer considered "to be a Roman citizen, but rather an Egyptian" (Dio, Scott-Kilvert 39, 54). Thus, Antony, as an Egyptian, is not only the enemy of Augustus, but Augustus' *rightful* enemy as a traitor of Rome. This is definitely a contrast to the very cursory treatment given to Antony by Virgil. Dio is, in a way, lifting up Augustus by tearing down Antony.

Throughout the scene of the Battle of Actium, we again see this lifting up of Augustus. He is the one making all the important decisions, although as Meyer Reinhold notes, "Augustus was placed at the centre of all events, though the victory was largely Agrippa's" (Reinhold 115). Dio does mention Agrippa, but the victory was won by the efforts of Augustus. Again, this is unlike Virgil, who pictures gods accomplishing the victory.

One place where Virgil and Dio seem similar is in their views of

Cleopatra's retreat. Dio pictures a Cleopatra who is worn out by the day's fighting and is unsure of what to do. He says that "both as a woman and as an Egyptian she found herself stretched to breaking-point by the agony of the suspense, and the constant and unnerving effort of picturing victory or defeat" (Dio, Scott-Kilvert 59). Because of her gender and her heritage, this situation is really too much for her to handle. She ends up fleeing toward Egypt, reminding us of the image of the pathetic Cleopatra that Virgil envisions sailing away from Actium.

Overall, Dio's history is filled with propaganda. The details of the story have been arranged in such a way as to exalt Augustus and to vilify Antony and Cleopatra. He accentuates Antony's association with Egypt so that he can paint him as a defiled Roman. He also exaggerates Augustus' achievements to make him look like a more successful general than he really was.

Virgil, on the other hand, minimizes both Antony and Augustus. He does focus on the difference between Roman and Egyptian/Eastern, but this contrast serves to lift up the ideal of Roman-ness that Virgil was describing throughout the *Aeneid*. Since he lacks the kind of pro-Augustus praise that Dio employs, we can see that Virgil was not under Augustus' thumb as some have suggested; however, his epic was not completely free of propagandistic elements. Virgil did retain autonomy as a poet, but his poetry was definitely seeking to convince people of the character of an ideal Roman. Of course, Augustus was in the position to cast himself as this ideal Roman, but this association does not seem to be Virgil's ultimate intention. While we should not ignore the political ties which Virgil may have had, we would do well while interpreting the *Aeneid* to pay attention to what Aeneas himself noticed:

Such were the scenes on Vulcan's shield: Aeneas
saw only art, not history... (8.729-30)

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