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Fama and Fiction in Vergil's Aeneid

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Afterword

Swan Song

As we saw in chapter 8, Juturna (speaking in disguise as Camers) presents her brother's prospective poetic immortality as something that makes him worth fighting for, and worth emulating. She follows this up by selecting a swan to represent Turnus in her omen. Setting up Turnus to be seen as a beautiful swan who must be rescued from a brutal eagle consolidates the lesson on *fama* she has just given to the Rutulians and his other Italian allies. The swan visibly embodies the aesthetic rewards of exemplary heroism, and reinforces the notion that in some way the hero himself will create the song that is to immortalize his glory.

Yet the hero cannot guarantee the survival of that song. In *Eclogue* 9, Menalcas ties Varro's swan-song immortalization to the survival of Mantua: *Vare, tuum nomen, superet modo Mantua nobis, / Mantua uae miserae nimium uicina Cremonae, / cantantes sublime ferent ad sidera cycni* ("Varus, may singing swans bear your name on high to the stars as long as Mantua remains to us—alas, Mantua, far too close to poor Cremona").¹ Singing

1. I owe this connection to Malamud 1998, 121 and accordingly adopt her translation of Menalcas' unfinished song in *Ecl.* 9.27–29. Malamud shows in detail how in the *Aeneid* the swan marks the poem's unsettled place in an epic tradition. See also Habinek 2005, 163–77 on warriors as swans.

swans can lift someone's name to the stars, but as with the poet's apostrophe to Nisus and Euryalus in *Aeneid* 9 (though to different effect) the memories shaped by song will be prolonged only if the city that nurtures the poet continues to exist.² *Fama* here, as so often, is at once divinely transcendent and contingent on its perpetuation by a particular human community.³

The hope of *fama* lies in the expectation that the past and present will continue to be meaningful and memorable in the more distant future. This hope relies above all on the transformations wrought by metaphor. It relies on the belief that suffering can be translated into lasting beauty through the poetic imagination, which turns fighters into swans and their battles into song. *Fama* indicates the ways that art can—up to a point—make memory and imagination communal or collective. But through its evident fluidity, and through the interaction in the poem between anonymous collective speech and individual authorship, *fama* in the *Aeneid* also reflects both the limits and extent of what “collective memory” and “social memory” might mean. The discourse of *fama* acknowledges the slipperiness with which newly created story worlds become part of reality through the blending of fictive and traditional memories. This is one of the reasons Vergilian *fama* can sensitize us to important aspects of the fictive knowledge that we find in many other genres, including novels written many centuries later.

Most fundamentally, fictions enter a network of memories which are continuously renewed by the mind's ability to link “this” new perception with “that” previous experience, whether those “this's” and “that's” are categorized as real or imaginary. In this interplay between old and new perceptions, between imagination and memory, its flexibility and inclusiveness allow the *Aeneid* to reconcile the tensions suggested by Richard Martin's succinct functional definitions of epic: both “as pervasive as everyday speech,” and “a mode of total communication, undertaking nothing less than the ideal expression of a culture.”⁴

2. Hardie 1987a would make the connection between swans and the immortality of fame still more emphatic by adopting an emendation of Housman's for Venus' swan-sign in Book 1 (1.395–96 would read *nunc stellas ordine longo / aut capere aut captas iam despectare uidentur, instead of nunc terras . . .*).

3. See Hardie 2012, 166–68 on Ovid's exploration of this idea in *Met.* 15.861ff., including allusions to Horace *Odes* 3.30 (which expresses related ideas in copious *fama*-ish vocabulary but does not refer directly to *fama*). As Hardie points out, “In entrusting his eternal fame to the mouths of the *populus* Ovid gives himself up to the *leue uulgus* who come and go in the House of *Fama*. Here we finally realize why *fama* as singular fame and *fama* as unattributable rumour cannot be separated: the pre-eminent poet, like the pre-eminent hero, is condemned to oblivion without the support of the nameless and unaccountable masses” (167).

4. Martin 2005, 18.

The totalizing scope of the *Aeneid*'s fictive knowledge gains from the extent to which the poetics of *pietas* and *fama* interact with *furor*. It is not just that the epic bestows *fama* on *pius Aeneas* and his people through the stories generated by their *pietas* and by the conflicts *pietas* provokes. *Fama* is maintained partly through the restitutive logic of remembrance by which *pietas* both seeks to order existence and acknowledges disorder. With its aspirations to harness emotional zeal in the service of an orderly cosmos, *pietas* is on one level at odds with *furor*. But though *furor* takes many forms, among these is the intensity of commitment to remembrance required by *pietas*. In chapter 3 we saw how central this is to rituals of lamentation in Book 6 (these issues come to the forefront also in Book 11, which I have not discussed). Intense remembrance also makes itself felt in vengeance-killings (above all in Books 10, 11, and 12), and in the whole endeavor of renewing Troy through the promised Italian settlement that Aeneas seeks. And when it reaches the extremes that take Aeneas and other human characters beyond the limits that would usually be set for mortal knowledge, *pietas* itself becomes almost madness.

The discourse of *fama* embeds its metamorphic commands in readers' pre-existing perceptions and memories in such a way as to enable new ways of knowing and remembering. We have seen this process at work on many levels within the poem's story world. At its simplest, this is the kind of conceptual blending through which Aeneas in Book 2 gives Carthaginians a share in the visions of divine destruction granted by his mother, the visions that help anchor his individual *fama* as *pius Aeneas* in the broader *fama* of the Trojan war that he recognized in the Carthaginian temple art in Book 1. The new imaginings Aeneas shapes for his listeners consist of their own mental pictures of an agricultural scene, melded with Venus' descriptive commands to "Look!" at the violence of the gods.

Earlier in his narrative, Aeneas tells how Sinon exploits a comparable process to contextualize and reinforce an anonymously circulated rumor about the expiatory purpose of the Greeks' gift horse. Sinon links his deceptive stories of Calchas' prophetic commands with Trojan perceptions of themselves as a *pius* people and of the Greeks as violators, and with the Trojans' particular memories of Diomedes and Ulysses breaking into Athena's shrine. The epic discourse of *fama* claims to recount a series of past events and to celebrate a familiar set of values. In that sense, *fama* both reveals a lost world to its readers and asserts the continued existence of that world. That continuity is proclaimed most strikingly on Aeneas' shield in Book 8, where the gods fight alongside mortals at the battle of Actium, an event of recent Roman history. Just as Venus in Book 2 shows Aeneas the gods bring-

ing an end to the city of Troy, the *Aeneid* invites its readers to envisage the gods at work in their own times.

Such continuities as these play complex roles in shaping the poem's fictive knowledge. This partly explains the fervor with which critics continue pondering what it might mean to understand the text as "Augustan." Aeneas' commemorative excesses, which incorporate varying degrees of *furor* into his *pietas*, can be—and have been—interpreted as constructing an *apologia* for Octavian's murderous excesses in the name of *pietas* towards his adoptive father Julius Caesar, as shameful reminders of those killings, or as communicating both ideas without resolution between them.⁵ The poem is ideologically complicated by the interaction between new and old perceptions and memories. But this interaction also helps make the poem a characteristically Augustan work of art that neither justifies nor denies the violence involved in founding and repeatedly re-founding Rome.⁶ The narrative dynamics of the *Aeneid* make room for an imaginative excess that eludes simplistic decoding.

Fama does not permanently merge with *fata*, and neither does *furor* become fully identified with *pietas* in the *Aeneid*. But epic *fama* provides the voice for divine *fata*, serving as a vehicle through which the poem's merging of creativity, history, and tradition may be conceived in terms of a collective authorless authority. This authority is imagined as neither entirely transcending the beliefs of a particular society, nor bound by the limits of a given historical moment; neither fully human nor fully divine, instead it reaps the aesthetic rewards of being poised between these spheres.

5. See especially Quint 1993, 76–83.

6. Morgan's contribution to Stahl 1998 expresses a similar view, though he uses the term "propaganda," which I would avoid. The term "propaganda" is too deeply imbued with the associations of twentieth-century totalitarianism to be easily rehabilitated for more nuanced ways of describing political communication, but I agree with Morgan that the poem's rich depiction of the pain and sorrow of civil war should not be taken as intrinsically subversive or anti-Augustan. Showing gods fighting on both sides at Actium, for example, is in itself neither a triumphalist endorsement of Octavian (the Olympians are with him) nor a demonizing condemnation (his wars have unleashed a terror that incorporates the whole cosmos).

