

Abstract

Virgil came back to the myth of the Golden Age over and over again in his agricultural and pastoral works, and no less so in the *Aeneid*. The epic supposedly treats the rise of Augustus as a new Golden Age for Roman politics, and Virgil was certainly not the first to entertain this image; Cicero had referenced the Golden Age in his own work, and there have been coins dated from around 43 B.C. that also refer to it, which most likely predate the *Eclogues*.¹ But the *Aeneid* contains very conflicting images of the rise of Augustan Rome and fall of the Golden Age of Italy, which comes crashing to a close with Aeneas' entrance. Many of standard motifs of the *Georgics* are perverted during the war with the Italians into examples of war, with bees representing an invading force and the myrtle rod being tipped with a spearhead. Silvia's stag plays a key role in Italy's decline, both acting as symbol of the Golden Age and triggering the actual war between Italian and Trojan. The importance of hunting and hunting similes evolve from a necessity of life in Book I, to a sport in Book III, to warfare in Book VII, culminating with the final image of Aeneas as an Umbrian hound snapping at the heels of Turnus, the wounded deer. Aeneas in his role as hunter instead of pious father brings an end to Italy's Saturnian ways.

¹ Patricia A. Johnston, *Vergil's Agricultural Golden Age: A Study of the Georgics*, 42.

The Decline of the Golden Age in the *Aeneid*

Epic though it may be, Virgil's *Aeneid* is a very pastoral work in many places. This is a quality that creates a strong dissonance between the glorified future that Aeneas stands for and the immediate effect he has on Italy when he arrives. Virgil's depiction of Latinus' Italy as the idyllic pastoral landscape of the *Georgics* is perverted by the introduction of war in the form of Aeneas and his Trojans. The catalyst for this violence comes from the hunting of Silvia's stag, and thus a threat to the landscape of Italy rather than its people. Ascanius' actions in Book VII not only lead directly to war, but also indicate the deterioration of the Golden Age of Italy into a Hesiodic Iron Age of war and human civilization. Partnership with animals gives way to hunting, agriculture to soldiery, peace to strife.

Through this decline, Virgil explores the basic conflict between Love and Strife, a fundamental concept in the *Aeneid*. He follows very much in the footsteps of Empedocles, in whose understanding of the cosmos Love, Strife, and 'the four roots of all things' are the building blocks of the universe.² An Empedoclean approach makes sense of Virgil's invocation of Erato before detailing the war between the Trojans and Latins, a subject that would surely seem more the domain of Calliope. However, of equal if not more importance to the *Aeneid* is Empedocles' stance on animals. According to Aristotle, "Empedocles forbade the killing of living creatures," and spoke of a time "when all things were tame and gentle to man, both beasts and birds and the fire of friendliness was

² Jackson P. Hershbell, "Hesiod and Empedocles," *The Classical Journal* 65:1970, 155.

kindled.”³ This φιλοφρόσυνη of which he speaks plays a key part in Virgil’s version of the corrosion of the Golden Age.

For Empedocles, one of the most important indications of the purity of this period is the sanctity of animal life and the lack of any type of sacrifice. In one remaining fragment of the Katharmoi, he writes of a time when “the altar was not wet with the unmixed blood of bulls but this was the greatest stain of guilt among men after tearing out the life to eat the limbs as food.”⁴ Virgil uses the relationship between Silvia and her stag to characterize the Italian Golden Age; and so the hunting of the stag thus triggers its fall.

Throughout the passage in question, Virgil compares the stag’s wild nature with his peaceful and loving connection to Silvia. The adjective *ferum* at 7.489 creates a contrast between natural state of the wild animal and its willingness to be handled and doted on.⁵ The stag continues to lead the life of a wild creature, wandering at leisure through the woods, but verges on domestication as it returns home each night to Silvia. There is a particularly pastoral feel in the detail of his return, as the stag acts spontaneously when such actions would normally be the result of training and domestication.⁶

The stag’s habitual return to Silvia, however, does more than simply add to Virgil’s depiction of the pastoral quality of rural Italy; it introduces a complex contemporary Roman law and the legal implications of hunting this specific deer.

³ Hershbell 158.

⁴ Hershbell 158.

⁵ Fordyce, *Aeneid VII-XII* 149.

⁶ Michael C. J. Putnam, “Silvia’s Stage and Virgilian Ekphrasis,” *Materiali e discussion per l’analisi dei testi classici* 34:1995, 122.

Romans distinguished clearly between pets or domesticated animals and their wild counterparts. In the case of domesticated animals, possession did not amount to ownership, although ownership did entail responsibility; that is to say, an oxen stolen by a thief would not become the possession of that thief, but any harm the animal did to crops if it escaped would be the responsibility of its original owner. With wild animals, possession did equal ownership, with the animal reverting to its original ownerless state should it manage to escape. These lines blur, however, when the animal in question is neither domesticated nor entirely wild; Silvia's stag is just such an animal, a deer that retains its freedom to wander at will but exhibits characteristics of a domesticated animal in its constant returning to Silvia.

This is a situation that would not have been at all foreign to Virgil's contemporaries. We know, after all, that game parks were becoming popular in the late Republic. Gaius the jurist, writing only a few decades later, wrote that deer "quae consuetudine abire et redire solent" are by no means considered tame; it is the "revertendi animum," Gaius says, that makes one of these wild creatures property.⁷ Should the habit of continual return disappear, so would ownership.⁸ Virgil makes clear the stag's "revertendi consuetudinem" by using imperfect verbs throughout the passage. He clearly emphasizes the habitual nature of the stag's homecoming, to the same degree that he accentuates Silvia's deep care for the creature. The importance of all this is that despite his intentions or lack of knowledge Ascanius is guilty of property crime, which would

⁷ Raymond J. Starr, "Silvia's Deer (Vergil, Aeneid 7.479-502): Game Parks and Roman Law," *The American Journal of Philology*, 113:1992, 438.

⁸ Gaius, 2 *Rer. Cott. S. Aur., Digest* 41.1.5.5.

have been recognized by a Roman audience.⁹ The matter is not simply one of sympathy and cruelty, but legal right and wrong.

But on top of being guilty of breaking a Roman law, Ascanius is also guilty of pride (“eximiae laudis succensus amore” 7.496) and cruelty, manifested in an overzealous love of the hunt. Allecto may guide his shooting hand, but Ascanius’ desire to kill is all his own, present from almost his first appearance in the epic. In Book IV his excitement at the prospect of hunting is portrayed as childlike; he whoops and hollers, imagining lions where he sees only goats. By Book VII, Ascanius has undergone perhaps as much change as his father. The exuberant boy of Book IV is replaced by an excited hunter in Book VII; soon, Apollo will have to intervene to prevent Ascanius taking on the role of full-blown warrior. The war between the Trojans and Latins impacts Ascanius’ growth from innocence to adulthood, just as it impacts Italy’s movement from pastoral landscape to Roman civilization.

Hunting, and specifically Ascanius’ hunting of Silvia’s stag, gives rise to the end of Virgil’s pastoral idyllic world, and the transition into an epic world full of the grim realities of war that mark the rise of what will be Rome. Michael Putnam argues that the main goal of *Aeneid* VIII is to present the Golden Age of Italy, “a unified picture of the site of Rome as it had been in the past and now is, through the eyes of exile from Arcadia, and as it will be until the golden age returns after the battle of Actium.”¹⁰ He thinks that the examples of the Saturnian people that Virgil provides in Evander and Latinus are perhaps meant as a model for Augustus to follow. But Virgil also clearly

⁹ Starr 439.

¹⁰ Michael C. J. Putnam, *The Poetry of the Aeneid: Four Studies in Imaginative Unity and Design*, London: Oxford University Press, 1965, 105.

points to Aeneas and the Trojans as the reason for the collapse of Italy's pastoral Golden Age.

Evander's home in Book VIII does have many of the strongest links to the Golden Age, especially in the Saturnian myth told at 8.314. On arriving in Latium after being ousted by Jupiter, Saturn (the Golden Age god) finds a pre-agricultural race and teaches them how to farm the land.¹¹ The concept of the fruitfulness of the earth, either by nature or by cultivation, is characteristic of Golden Age myths. The attributes of peace and justice are also common to Golden Age mythology, and are present in Latinus' character; when he receives the envoys of Aeneas in Book VII, he explains that his people, a *Saturni gentem*, have no need for laws.¹² Putnam believes Silvia's stag is linked to this depiction of the Italians as part of a golden race, he argues that Latinus has his own version of justice "based not on compulsion and constraint but on instinctive, innate adherence to custom. It is for this 'golden' moment of wildness become civilized, held captive in its freedom only by the tugs of proven habit, that the stag stands as emblem." The change from agriculture to war, from φιλοφρόσυνη to hunting is the change from Georgic idyll to Roman domination.

The bees that swarm before Latinus in Book VII are the perfect example of this deterioration. Bees crop up over and over in the *Georgics* as examples of the hard, honest work of pastoral labor or military precision; in the *Aeneid* they are interpreted as proof of a new race coming to wage war. Throughout Book VII georgic actions are twisted into emblems of warfare; the book ends with the vivid image of the warrior maiden Camilla's

¹¹ V. J. Rosivach, "Latinus' genealogy and the Palace of Picus (*Aeneid* 7. 45-9, 170-91)," *The Classical Quarterly* 30: 1980, 144.

¹² Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.203.

myrtle-topped spear, what Putnam calls “the final emblem of the perversion of pastoral into violent, of love misguided into war, of Venus’ myrtle into a weapon of Mars.”¹³

Perhaps most unambiguous is the immediate effect of the shooting of Silvia’s stag: the farmers in the surrounding fields respond to her cries by picking up their tools for farming and attacking Ascanius and the Trojans. The peaceable occupation of farming and agriculture morphs into soldiery and war.

Hunting is one of the most pervasive motifs of the *Aeneid*, appearing in the plot, similes and ekphraseis. Hunting perverts Empedocles’ worldview, turning animals into sport and providing the transition between agriculture and warfare. It goes from something in Book I that is necessary to survival, to the unnecessary search for victory and pride in Books III and VII, to war with man tracking man. Camilla is hunted down by Arruns, as she unwittingly hunts her own quarry, Chloereus.

The image of the wounded deer crops up multiple times, as the primary object of the hunt. With the exception of the deer killed for necessities sake in Book I, Virgil uses the image of the injured deer either to enhance the sympathy felt for the creature in distress, or to emphasize the cruelty of the one doing the hunting.¹⁴ The four primary examples are the Dido simile in Book IV, Silvia’s stag, the Mezentius simile of Book X, and the final Turnus simile of Book XII. The last example works both ways, simultaneously creating stronger sympathy for Turnus as the hunted deer, and highlighting Aeneas’ cruel treatment of his victim.

This last scene is unsettling and problematic in many ways. As he kills Turnus, Aeneas offers him up as retribution for Pallas’ death. His final words (“Palas te hoc

¹³ Putnam, “*Aeneid* VII and the *Aeneid*,” 419.

¹⁴ M. K. Thornton, “Vergil’s Injured Deer Motif in the *Aeneid*,” *Latomus* 55:1996, 389.

vulnere, Pallas/ immolat et poenam scelerato ex sanguine sumit”) especially his use of the verb *immolare*, imply not just a sacrifice, but a human sacrifice.¹⁵ Empedocles sees the sacrificing of animals, to say nothing of humans, as evidence of the end of the Golden Age. Aeneas’ sacrificial killing of Turnus is the final blow to the Italian Golden Age, now corrupted by the bloodthirsty nature of war.

¹⁵ Virgil 12.948-49.

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