

AENEAS AND THE GATES OF SLEEP:
AN ETYMOLOGICAL APPROACH

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895 *sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur
cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbris,
altera candenti perfecta nitens elephanto,
sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia Manes.
his ibi tum natum Anchises unaque Sibyllam
prosequitur dictis portaque emittit eburna.
ille viam secat ad navis sociosque revisit.*

THE END OF *AENEID* 6, where Aeneas leaves the underworld by the gate of false dreams rather than by the gate of true spirits¹ which his true and uplifting vision of Rome's future seems to merit, has perplexed commentators ancient and modern. It is clear why Lucian (*Ver. Hist.* 2.33) sends his travellers through the false gate: he has already confessed (*ibid.* 1.4) μηδὲν ἄληθες λέγειν; but what does Vergil intend? Surely even those critics who detect a darker side to the vision would not want Vergil to highlight it by such a crudely satirical device. R. G. Austin,² after a comprehensive review of earlier theories, admits to finding the problem "inscrutable." Of the solutions proposed since, three may be briefly mentioned here: H. C. Gotoff,³ having rightly criticised the argument of R. J. Tarrant⁴ that Vergil's choice of gate is due to Aeneas' being, in eschatological terms, less real than the souls below, then suggests in effect that Aeneas' use of the false gate is equivalent to his drinking the waters of Lethe, a quite unparalleled idea, to say nothing of the fact that what Aeneas has seen in the underworld is of a different order, and affects his conduct differently, from what he has been told in earlier prophecies; while D. A. West's thesis⁵ that, "In Platonic terms [Vergil's myth] is a falsehood like the truth; in epic terms Aeneas emerges from the gate of false dreams," is open to the objection

¹I cannot see, however, that it helps to press the distinction between *insomnia* and *umbrae*, and in what follows I shall refer only to "dreams."

²R. G. Austin (ed.), *P. Vergili Maronis "Aeneidos" Liber Sextus* (Oxford 1977) *ad loc.*

³H. C. Gotoff, "The Difficulty of the Ascent from Avernus," *CP* 80 (1985) 35-40.

⁴R. J. Tarrant, "Aeneas and the Gates of Sleep," *CP* 77 (1982) 51-55.

⁵D. A. West, *The Bough and the Gate* (Exeter 1987, Jackson Knight Memorial Lecture 17) 13-14.

that Vergil's chosen epic metaphor has completely suppressed the essential notion of truth.

The substance of the approach taken here is that Vergil, by writing *falsis*, not *veris*, in line 894, *vera*, not *falsa*, in line 896, and either *hac* or *qua*, not *sed*, at the beginning of line 896, did indeed make Aeneas leave by the shining-white gate of true dreams, but that his text was subsequently altered to make it accord with the Homeric picture (*Od.* 19.562-567) in which horn stands for truth and ivory for falsehood. That Homeric picture was supported by etymology, κέρας being derived from κραίνω and ἐλέφας from ἐλεφαίρομαι; with the textual changes suggested above, Vergil's picture also, although now the opposite of Homer's, becomes etymological. In making it so, Vergil must have been aware of the word ἔνυμος in his source, but that point should not be pressed.

There is no difficulty in Vergil's reversing a Homeric picture: the order of the mountains at *Georgics* 1.281-282, Pelion-Ossa-Olympus, is the opposite of that at *Odyssey* 11.315-316, and here too the change is supported by etymology, Olympus' leafiness, and hence its place on top, being suggested by the verbal link between Οὔλυμπος and οὔλος.⁶ Parallels for early alterations to Vergil's text which may have completely displaced the original reading are, by their nature and the nature of the Vergilian textual tradition, hard to find, but there is no doubt that changes were being made in the first century A.D. (for example the *ille ego* passage appended to the beginning of the work),⁷ and many modern commentators, by approving recent conjectures, seem to accept that some of these changes have hitherto escaped detection⁸ (one such may be at *Aeneid* 1.343 where Ribbeck, Goelzer, Mynors, and Austin approve *auri* for the unanimous *agri* of the tradition [including Servius]).

The effect of *falsis* on line 894 is to draw the verbal images of the line more closely together: *cornu* is derived (wrongly, of course) by Varro (*Ling.* 7.25) from *curvus*, which in turn regularly implies wickedness or falsehood (*curvo dinoscere rectum atque . . . quaerere verum*: *Hor. Epist.* 2.2.44-45), so that the gate of horn is for Vergil a natural exit for false dreams; as well as linking with *cornea*, *falsis* also forms a paronomasia, with the suggestion of an etymology, with *facilis*: the same word-play is found at Cicero *De officiis* 1.91 (*falli facile est*), but in our passage the etymology is backed up by a cross-reference to Homer's ἐλεφαίρομαι contained in a Greek equivalent of *facilis*, ἐλαφρός: that Vergil's readers need to be aware of Greek equivalents

⁶Whether in this case there was also a Homeric etymology, however, is unclear: Πήλιον εἰνοσίφυλλον may have been suggested by πάλλω, but the same epithet was used of Mt. Neriton.

⁷See R. G. Austin, "Ille Ego Qui Quondam . . .," *CQ* NS 18 (1968) 107-115, especially the last paragraph.

⁸See further E. Courtney, "The Formation of the Text of Vergil," *BICS* 28 (1981) 13-29.

is shown again in line 896, where *insomnia* depends for its meaning on ἐνύπνια. To return to horn and falsehood, it will not be long before horn again, its etymology from *curvus* now clearly stated, shows its bad side in the *Aeneid*, first as the bow with which Iulus shoots Silvia's stag (7.497), then as the trumpet with which Allecto sounds the war-cry (*ibid.* 513); and the *cornua falsa* of Pasiphaë (Prop. 3.19.12) or of Jupiter carrying off Europa (Ovid *Fasti* 5.606: *falsā cornua fronte*) may themselves be etymologically pointed.

The ivory gate, on the other hand, is described by Vergil as both *candens* and *perfecta*: the connection between *candor* and truth hardly needs illustration, but *tua veritas, tuus candor* (Pliny *Pan.* 84) may be quoted; while *perfecta* is not merely an artificial way of indicating that this is the gate *quae perficit*, but is also an allusion to the Homeric etymology (κραίνω) of the truthful gate, as *facilis* was to ἐλεφαίρομαι and the false gate. In addition, the passage contains a further word-play relating to the Homeric gates, which is present in isolation with the traditional text also, but which now forms part of a network with the above etymologies and argues that they are not out-of-place: *viam secat* (899) is a well-attested expression, but its use here, immediately after *eburna*, alludes to πιστός ἐλέφας, a phrase which Vergil himself translates as *sectus elephantus* at *Aeneid* 3.464.

It remains to discuss *sed*. Line 896 seems unsatisfactory on any interpretation of the passage since it fails to mention the route taken by the dreams: Austin (above, note 2) too is troubled by this. With the traditional text, it can be put right by emending *ad* to *hac*, but it is equally likely that the culprit is *sed*, which will owe its place to someone's (probably the original transposer's) desire to stress the supposed contrast between the gate's appearance and its character: a possible correction, now that that contrast has been removed, is *qua*, but, in the interests of variation, *hac* seems better.⁹

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⁹I should like to express my gratitude to Professor A. J. Woodman for his helpful advice and encouragement with this article. In our discussion he proposed a different solution to the question of *sed*, namely that it and *qua* were transposed along with the adjectives which follow them in a single process: in other words, line 894 originally began *cornea, sed falsis*, with *sed* serving to distinguish what *fertur* (by Homer) from what Vergil wishes to claim, and line 896 began *qua vera*.