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Flight Paths: Re-examining Swans in Vergil's *Aeneid*

"Behold, twelve joyful swans in a row," says Venus to her disheartened son. The interpretation of Venus' omen for Aeneas is based on the behavior of swans and eagles. As described in *Aen*. 1.393-400: just as a flock of swans, after an eagle attempted to overthrow them, playfully land, so too will the Trojans find safe harbor. And indeed, they do in Latium. Venus' omen establishes the swans as a symbol for Aeneas and the Trojans where each swan represents one of the Trojan's ships. Due to the fronting of Venus' omen within the *Aeneid* itself and the listing of her credentials for reading omens—she says in line 392, "unless my parents, untrustworthy, taught me augury in vain"—scholars readily accept Venus' omen as true. Hardie and Green have even accepted Housman's emendation to the text which replaces *terras* with *stellas* in line 395. In this case, the swans flying high toward the stars signifies Aeneas completing his destiny and being deified for establishing the peoples that will found Rome (Hardie 1987 and Green 2009). The fulfillment of Venus' omen thus strengthens the swan-Trojan association.

However, the swan-Trojan symbolism clashes with a passage in Book 12 from *Aen*. 12.247-256. Juturna, Turnus' sister, incites the Latins into battle by contriving an omen: an eagle attacks a flock of swans and snatches the lead swan, whence the flock drives the eagle off to free their leader. The Latins identify themselves as the swans and Aeneas as the eagle. Juturna's use of swan-Latin symbolism directly challenges Venus' omen to Aeneas in Book 1. Hardie and Green explain the discrepancy by noting that Juturna's omen is introduced as a false prophecy in line 246: "she disturbed the Latins' minds and deceived them with her portent." Green also claims that Juturna herself, as a water nymph, is a lesser deity and is not a recognized god of augury (Green 2009, 157). Venus readily reassures Aeneas, and the audience, of her ability to

read the auspices and interprets the omen for him. In this way, Vergil validates the swan-Trojan symbol explicitly.

I contend that the swan simile in Book 7—in which the troops of the Latin leader Messapus are compared to singing swans—better contextualizes and validates Juturna's omen than Venus' omen. The simile reads: "[Messapus' troops], equal in number, were advancing and singing their king: as when snowy swans, once amid liquid clouds, bring themselves back from pasture and emit melodious rhythms from their long necks; far off the river and Asian marsh resound the echoing. No one would think that brass-clad battle lines were mixed in such a troop, but that an airy cloud of raucous birds from a deep whirlpool presses toward the shore" (*Aen*. 7.698-705). The Book 7 simile marks the first time that the Latins are compared to swans, which tilts the swan symbol in favor of Juturna's omen. The connection between swans and Messapus' troops can be extrapolated to the Latin forces at large because the simile occurs in the catalogue of Latin leaders and their soldiers. It is, after all the Rutulians who first self-identify with the swans in Juturna's omen rather than Messapus' troops.

In my presentation, I will first examine how the geographic landscapes embedded in the Book 1, 7, and 12 passages inform the swan-eagle relationship. Then, I will analyze how Vergil's purposeful clash of images in Juturna's omen leaves room for her omen to be just as truthful as Venus' omen.

In both the Book 1 and Book 12 augury scenes, the land and sky play a significant role in the interpretation of the swan-eagle conflict. The eagle is *always* the one to disrupt the swans after swooping down from the heavens. The swans only take to the sky to defend themselves against the eagle, after which they return to the land that they previously occupied. Thus, the sky represents the battlefield where the swan and eagle—Latins and Trojans—meet. The land then

represents safety, especially the safety that comes after defeating an enemy, because the swans are free to reoccupy the land without fear of attack. In this sense, land and safety become synonymous with victory. In Venus' omen at lines 397-8, the swans' delight in their victory manifests in play and singing songs as they soar through the sky and resettle on land.

The swan simile in Book 7 maintains the same sky-battlefield, land-victory associations but adds another geographic landscape—the water. The swans in the simile sing melodious songs that resound throughout the river and marsh as they return to their pasture from the sky. Water is a symbol of liminality, a space between victory and defeat. Messapus' troops are described as *resides populos desuetaque bello*, that is they are "idle people," "unaccustomed to war," in the prelude to the simile so the journey through the three landscapes is filled with the potential to either return victorious or in defeat depending on how their unaccustomedness hinders them (*Aen*. 7.693).

The Book 7 swans' song resounding through the river and marsh recalls the joyful victory song of the Book 1 swans. The water then takes on a positive connotation as the potential for the Latins to beat the Trojans is expressed: the swans traveling through the river becomes representative of the Latins overcoming their unaccustomedness to war and heading for victory. The fame and glory that comes after winning a war is evoked too through the resounding victory song.

However, the swans' song gets distorted in Book 11 lines 454-458, as described in passage 3, after the Latins have lost a battle and must prepare to fight once more as Aeneas approaches. Vergil again uses a simile to compare the Latin forces to swans: "Here, on all sides, a great clamor arose from the various dissent into the air: no differently than when, by chance, a flock of birds in a tall grove settled down, or in Padusa's fish-filled river, raucous swans sang

songs through the loquacious pools." In a manner similar to the Book 7 simile, the Book 11 swans' song resonates across a pool of water. However, the swans' song is now rough and hoarse, which expresses their dwindling morale and anxiety about facing the Trojans in battle. The water's liminality here tilts negatively for the Latins as they seem overcome by the consequences of their unaccustomedness. The discordant swan sounds, thus make it even harder for the audience to interpret what the Latins' legacy will be.

In Book 12, Juturna's omen opens with the swans in the water and ends with the lead swan being dropped back into the water. In fact, the mention of land is completely absent. The finality and outcome of the war are filled with the potential for either side to be victorious as water and sky imagery dominate the omen. Instead of victory arising from claiming the land, victory is realized when the swans command *both* the water *and* the sky as the eagle retreats into the clouds and the leader swan safely returns to the water. This image of total victory calls back to Venus' omen when the swans hold both the sky and the land after the eagle's attack.

The swans' close association with both the land (victory) and water (potential defeat) is evident by the fact that Vergil first calls them "shore birds" before specifying that they are swans in Juturna's omen and in the Book 7 simile (line 705) when Messapus's troops are described as raucous swans "pressing toward shore." The term "shore bird"—and even the use of the shore as a landscape itself—exemplifies the conflict between the Latins and Trojans as both parties fight for victory and dominance over the swan symbol. If the swans are interpreted as the Latins, Juturna's omen suggests that the Latins will overcome their unaccustomedness to war to defeat the Trojans and return to their peaceful, pre-war state. But, if the swans represent the Trojans, as Venus' omen would dictate, the Trojans would be in a similar situation as they were in Book 1: weary from overcoming their struggles at sea, but ultimately one step closer to their destiny. The

absence of land in Juturna's omen is especially consequential for the Trojans since Venus' omen—and subsequently the swan symbol itself—arose from the Trojans' desire to forego water for solid ground. The lead swan returning to the water after fighting the eagle, represents the liminal space Aeneas is caught in no matter the outcome; he and the Trojans are still, in the grand scheme of things, far off from their Roman destiny.

The result of victory is then more positive for the Latins in Juturna's omen just as it was more positive for the Trojans in Venus' omen. Vergil, indeed, points to the swans in Juturna's omen being representative of the Latins when Tolumnius, the Latins' auger, cries that a wicked foreigner has come to plunder the Latins' shore. He says in Book 12 lines 261-263: "O miserable Latins, whom, *weak as the birds*, a wicked foreigner terrifies you in war, and ravages your shores with force." The repeated use of "shore" gives greater context to who the "shore birds" are and what they are fighting to defend. Moreover, Tolumnius' acknowledgment of Juturna's omen when he cries at line 259, "This, this is what I often sought with my prayers. I accept and I acknowledge the gods," serves as a mirroring of Venus' credentials for reading augury scenes correctly. The fact that an auger has hailed Juturna's omen as a direct answer to his prayers from the gods further validates Juturna's omen and reinforces the swan-Latin association.

The adjective *improbus* is also repeated across Juturna's omen and Tolumnius' interpretation of the omen. Jove's eagle and Aeneas are both described as "wicked," which showcases how biased Juturna' omen is in favor of the Latins. Whereas Venus' omen describes the eagle at line 394 of Book 1 as "the heavenly bird of Jove" despite its attempt to overthrow the swans, Juturna's omen does not hesitate to characterize Jove's bird as "wicked" in its deeds, in line 250 of Book 12, and "wicked" when compared to the "superior" or "excellent" lead swan. The clear bias of Juturna's omen emphasizes that it was created for a specific purpose: to rally

the Latins against the Trojans. Although some may say that that bias is an indication of the false and deceptive nature of Juturna's omen, Venus' omen was also contrived to reassure Aeneas of his future. In fact, Venus goes so far as to interpret her omen in advance of the augury scene itself. Therefore, the "contrived" creation of Juturna's omen cannot be held against her omen's truth.

Some may also point to Vergil's negative description of Juturna's actions as further proof that her omen is false; Vergil says in Book 12 line 246 that Juturna "threw the Latins' minds into confusion and *deceived* them with her portent." In contrast to Venus' omen, which was introduced in Venus' direct speech to Aeneas and featured *no* narrative commentary *except* for her own interpretation, Vergil seems to indicate that Juturna's omen is false. However, the deceptive nature of Venus' omen is revealed through Aeneas' response to his mother: "Why do you*, also cruel*, deceive your son so often with false images? Why can I not join my hand with yours and hear and speak true voices?" In asking why Venus deceives him, Aeneas directly comments on the challenge and inability for mortals to interpret the actions of the gods. Vergil here seems to point out that the swan and eagle may not be fixed symbols mutually exclusive to *either* the Trojans *or* the Latins.

Later in line 252 of Book 12, Vergil comments on Juturna's omen that the sight of swans fending off a wicked eagle is "wonderous to behold." The supine accentuates that Juturna's omen is hard for mortals to understand. The ambiguous nature if *mirabilis* as something that sparks wonder, but neither positively or negatively, emphasizes the difficulties and pitfalls in interpreting omens. Afterall, omens by nature throw the viewer's minds into confusion as the viewer attempts to reads the omens' signs, which appear to deceive while hiding their truth.

To conclude, Vergil expertly plays into the ambiguous nature of omens by purposefully reutilizing the swan-eagle symbol from Venus' omen in Juturna's omen. The result of this double use is the conflation of symbols and identities between the swans, eagle, Latins, and Trojans. Yet, that conflation doubly serves Juturna's omen as both the Latins and Trojans can be associated with the swan or the eagle. Thus, Juturna's omen is doubly true since her omen's purpose was fulfilled—the Latins courageously engaged in battle—even though the Trojans ultimately won the war.

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