

Virgil, *Aeneid* 8.678-690:

Translation and Critical Commentary

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I. Introduction

In Book 8 of the *Aeneid*, Virgil presents the ekphrasis of Aeneas' shield, transforming visual description into a densely ideological narrative. Verses 678–690 centre on the Battle of Actium, where Augustus is figured as the decisive agent of Roman order. This passage operates not merely as historical representation but as poetic construction, uniting epic form with divine authority and political power. Through marked word order, compressed syntax, and vivid imagery, Virgil articulates a charged opposition between Roman discipline and eastern excess. The commentary will explore how these linguistic and stylistic features contribute to the passage's broader interpretative force. The Latin text is that of Mynors (1969).

II. Translation

On this side stands Augustus Caesar on the lofty stern,
leading Italians into battle, together with the senate and people,
680 the gods of the household and the great gods; his joyful brows
spew forth twin flames, and on top of his head the star of his father appears.
Elsewhere towering Agrippa, favoured by winds and gods,
leads his column; his temples gleam
with the beaks of the naval crown, proud mark of war.
685 On the other side Antony, with barbarian aid and varied arms,
victor from the peoples of the dawn and the red shore,
draws with him Egypt and the might of the East and farthest
Bactra; and his Egyptian wife (O impious shame!) follows.
All rush on at once, and the whole sea foams up,
690 churned up by the oars, now drawn back, and the triple-pointed prows.

III. Context

The description of Actium in verses 678–690 forms part of the shield forged by Vulcan at Venus’ request earlier in Book 8 of the *Aeneid*. As the shield’s imagery unfolds, it presents a sequence of scenes from Rome’s future history, culminating in the confrontation between Augustus and his opponents at Actium. Within the narrative, Aeneas views the scenes without grasping their historical meaning, and responds with wonder rather than understanding. This creates a contrast between the hero’s limited perception and the reader’s awareness of Rome’s future. As the poem continues, Aeneas lifts the shield, taking on the symbolic weight of a destiny he cannot yet fully comprehend, with Virgil drawing together past, present, and future within a single tableau.

IV. Commentary

678 *hinc Augustus agens Italos in proelia Caesar*

The scene opens with *hinc*, sharply demarcating the opposing forces,¹ while the framing of *Augustus...Caesar* asserts ideological supremacy. The title *Augustus* carries quasi-sacral authority and simultaneously recalls Julius Caesar, linking dynastic and divine legitimacy. The participle *agens* (with *Italos*) replaces a finite verb, creating a static, timeless vision.² By invoking *Italos*, Virgil recasts Actium as the defence of an Italy united under Augustus.³

679 *cum patribus populoque, penatibus et magnis dis,*

This broader vision of unity is then concentrated in Rome itself. The ablatives *cum patribus populoque, penatibus et magnis dis* present Augustus as accompanied by both civic and divine

¹ cf. 685

² cf. *stans*, 680

³ Eden, 2018, pp.180-1

forces, suggesting harmony between senate, people, and gods. Pairing and labial alliteration (p–p–p) reinforce this collective identity. The weighty, almost ritual rhythm lends the line sacral authority, while the ‘great gods’ evoke the wider Olympian pantheon,⁴ thereby reinforcing divine approval of the campaign.

680 stans celsa in puppi, geminas cui tempora flammæ

Continuing the present-tense vision with *stans* established at 678 (*agens*), Virgil sustains a vivid, monumental scene. Building on the preceding verse, *stans ... puppi* places Aeneas in an elevated, almost epiphanic posture: The participle fixes the moment in iconic stillness, while the ablative suggests authority and command. Moreover, *geminas...flammas* introduces a dative of possession, with the flames at Augustus’ temples (*tempora*) appearing as an innate mark of divine authority. The image heightens the sense of portent and recalls both Trojan fire-omens⁵ and Achilles.⁶

681 laeta uomunt patriumque aperitur uertice sidus.

The sense of *geminas cui tempora flammæ* is completed as the twin flames pour forth (*uomunt*) their light, while *laeta* conveys the joyful, auspicious response associated with victory. Enjambment sustains the movement across the line break, tightly linking the verses and foregrounding the visual image before *aperitur* signals sudden revelation. *patrium* marks the star as Caesar’s, while *uertice* places it above the leader affirming his celestial legitimacy. The image recalls the *sidus Iulium* (44 BC),⁷ signalling divine approval and Augustan triumph.

⁴ Gransden, 2003, p.176

⁵ cf. 2.682–684

⁶ cf. *Hom. Il.* 18.214

⁷ Goldschmidt, 2013, p.119

682 parte alia ventis et dis Agrippa secundis

In parallel with Augustus, *parte alia* introduces M. Vispanius Agrippa as a balanced counterpart. The ablative *ventis et dis secundis* attributes success to favourable winds and divine support, framing Agrippa as supported by both naval strength and divine forces. Servius contrasts Augustus' near-divine self-sufficiency to Agrippa's dependence on divine favour,⁸ marking him as subordinate to the princeps.⁹

683–684 arduus agmen agens, cui, belli insigne superbum, / tempora nauali fulgent rostrata corona.

Agrippa is presented in a commanding yet ultimately subordinate position, parallel to Augustus and sustained through the participial sequence *agens, stans*. The compressed phrase *arduus agmen agens* employs alliteration and figura etymologica to reinforce disciplined command through insistent sound-patterning, while *belli insigne superbum* extends this authority into conspicuous military display. Whether *insigne* is read as nominative apposition or as part of a looser accusative extension,¹⁰ the ambiguity itself reflects the emblem's absorption into the syntax of military power. *tempora* balances Augustus' *templa*¹¹ creating structural correspondence before the verse culminates in *fulgent* and the *rostrata corona*, whose naval imagery and radiance crystallise triumph. Yet Agrippa's splendour, though vividly individualised, is finally drawn into the wider Augustan ideological frame.

685 hinc ope barbarica uariisque Antonius armis,

⁸ Fratantuono & Smith, 2018, p.700-1

⁹ cf. 8.707 where motif (*ventis vocatis*) recurs during Cleopatra's escape

¹⁰ Fordyce, 1977, p.297; Eden, 2018, p.183; Pinkster 2015, 1070-4

¹¹ cf. 680-1

The composition shifts into a corresponding panel of opposition. *hinc* counterbalances the earlier Roman tableau and initiates a structured four-line depiction of Antony's forces.¹² *ope barbarica* suggests eastern wealth,¹³ or military resources,¹⁴ marking Antony's army as foreign and implicitly un-Roman. *uariis...armis* reinforces this through imagery of heterogeneous equipment, visually and morally opposed to Roman order. Framed by such language, Antonius is distanced from Roman identity allowing the conflict to be recast as one against external barbarian forces rather than civil war.

686 uictor ab Aurorae populis et litore rubro,

Continuing the eastward expansion of the previous description, the verse moves fluidly through the paired ablatives governed by *ab*, from personified *Aurora* to her plural *populi*, and the distant *litus rubrum*. The plurality sharply contrasts with Augustus' unified and civilised *populus*: Antony's power derives from disparate foreign nations rather than Roman cohesion. Consequently, *uictor* carries an ironic force, exaggerating his questionable eastern successes. The line culminates in *rubro*, whose exotic remoteness and moral otherness are subtly reinforced by the *r* alliteration threading through the verse.

687-8 Aegyptum uires que Orientis et ultima secum / Bactra uehit

The eastward trajectory now reaches its furthest extent, intensifying both geographical scale and ideological tension. Initial *Aegyptum* foregrounds Antony's coalition and anticipates Cleopatra's later entry, while the substantive *Orientis* evokes an opposing eastern sphere, its symbolic 'light' set against Octavian's guiding star and thus aligned with alien, non-Roman power. Polysyndeton

¹² cf. 685–8

¹³ Gransden, 2003, p.178

¹⁴ Mynors, 1969, 685

(-que...et) accumulates momentum before culminating in *ultima Bactra*, whose hyperbolic remoteness exaggerates Antony's reach. The effect is simultaneously expansive and unstable. A vast foreign assemblage implicitly opposed to Roman unity.

688 sequiturque (nefas) Aegyptia coniunx.

Virgil sharpens the poem's moral opposition through naming and sound-patterning, setting Augustus and Agrippa against Antonius and his *Aegyptia coniunx*. Cleopatra appears only through metonymy, her suppressed name heightening both distance and condemnation.¹⁵ The parenthetical *nefas* intrudes as an explicit moral judgement, while *sequitur* implies fatal inevitability, binding the political conflict of 687 to the personal transgression of 688. Their union thus emerges as the ethical and ideological nadir of the scene.

689-690 una omnes ruere ac totum spumare reductis / conuolsum remis rostrisque tridentibus aequor.

The naval conflict now erupts fully as the scene shifts from sharply defined figures to a collective movement of violent energy. *una*, used adverbially, stresses complete simultaneity, while *totum* enlarges the scale of disruption until the whole sea seems engulfed. The historical infinitives (*ruere*, *spumare*) propel the scene into vivid motion, conveying the uncontrolled violence of the engagement. The noun *aequor*, held back until the second verse, creates suspense, as the etymologically calm sea becomes both agent (*spumare*) and victim (*conuolsum...aequor*), frothing and torn by oars and tridents, while the insistent *r* alliteration reinforces the harsh, rolling turbulence of the battle. The effect is strikingly visual: a living scene on Vulcan's shield, where myth and history merge into a dynamic spectacle.

¹⁵ cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1.37; Prop. *Eleg.* 3.11, 4.6 (for Augustan poets' silent ban on mentioning Cleopatra by name)

V. Conclusion

The cumulative effect of Virgil's linguistic and stylistic choices within the ekphrasis in this passage functions to shape the reader's response by transforming visual description into an ideologically charged poetic narrative. Through controlled syntax, marked word order, sound-patterning, and vivid imagery, Virgil constructs a sustained opposition between Roman discipline and eastern excess, while presenting Actium as both inevitable and divinely sanctioned. The passage therefore operates not simply as historical representation, but as poetic construction, where epic form and political ideology converge demanding interpretation as much as visualisation.

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