

On one side is Augustus Caesar, standing high on the stern of the ship and driving the Italians into battle, with the senate, and the people, the gods of the home, and the great gods. His temples pour forth joyful twin flames, and from the crown of his head the star of his father is revealed.

On the other wing, towering Agrippa, driving the line forward with favourable winds and gods. His temples gleam with the proud emblem of war; a naval crown adorned with the beaked prows of ships.

On the other side, Antony, with foreign wealth and diverse weapons, comes victorious from the shore of the Red Sea and the peoples of the Dawn. With him sail Egypt and the forces of the East, as far as Bactria. And - the greatest sin - he is accompanied by his Egyptian wife.

As one, they rush in, and at once the whole surface of the sea is covered with foam, having been churned by the pulling of their oars and the three-pronged beaks of their ships.

Virgil here depicts the Battle of Actium of 31BC, wherein Augustus' forces opposed those of Cleopatra and Antony. This extract sits within a larger episode of ekphrasis describing the shield of Aeneas, forged by Vulcan and depicting scenes from Rome's past, both mythic and historical. At the very centre of the shield, the ekphrasis culminates with Actium and Augustus' subsequent triumph. This shield ekphrasis is widely understood to be modelled on *Iliad* 18 605-752, but where the Homeric precursor sees the shield of Achilles decorated with scenes of peaceful life to contrast the landscape of war which dominates the epic, Virgil's interpretation instead depicts *illic res Italas Romanorumque triumphos* (626) in a manner befitting the political message of the poem (West, 1990, 1). The scenes depicted on the shield, particularly Actium, propagate Augustan political ideology, concerned with legitimising Augustus' rule through divine approval, national unity, and contrast with foreign enemies.

[678]

This quatrain focused on Augustus provides the structural and syntactic model for the lines to follow, foregrounding Augustus within this section of the shield ekphrasis. Each element of Augustus' depiction in these four short lines is designed

to emphasise his power, legitimacy, and divine ordainment, conforming to the poem's political function.

hinc: cf. 8.685. This structural parallel encourages a comparison between the Augustus and Antony, the focus of these two quatrains. This marks them as the effective protagonists of the passage and characterises Antony as the foil to Augustus (Eden, 1975, 180).

Augustus...Caesar: the enclosing word order here reinforces Augustus' centrality; he dominates the line both politically and syntactically, with ultimate authority as he leads his forces into battle (Fratantuono & Smith, 2018, 697).

Italos: Augustus' political messaging aimed to communicate him as a leader with power over the entirety of the Italian peninsula, rather than Rome alone (Eden, 1976, 180-181).

[679]

This line emphasises Augustus' legitimacy through institutional, popular, and divine support.

patribus populoque: cf. *SPQR, senatus populusque Romanus* (O'Hara, 2018, 109). This was an important element of late-Republican political language, effectively guaranteeing the association between the people and the Senate as legitimate and legal. Such a reference used here constitutes a simplified but recognisable proclamation of legitimacy rooted in established republican identity, adopted within Augustan propagandist language and imagery as a means of communicating the lawfulness of the new regime (for more on this issue, see Moatti, 2017).

penatibus et magnis dis: This phrase simultaneously legitimises Augustus through divine support and aligns him with Rome's mythological founder, harking back to 3.11-12, where Aeneas describes carrying the gods from a sacked Troy. The alignment of Augustus with Aeneas is a primary component of the epic's political messaging. Augustus framed himself as the father of Rome's re-birth by identifying with its mythological progenitor, alleviating the novelty of autocratic authority and ascribing certain values and successes to Aeneas as a means of identifying with them by proxy (Toohey, 1984, 19-20). However, line 679 has Augustus set at a level *above* Aeneas; where Aeneas departs Troy as the defeated party in a conflict, Augustus is depicted riding into a battle in which he was the victor (Gransden, 1976, 176).

[680-681]

stans...puppi: cf. 10.261-270, continuing the associations between Aeneas and Augustus (Gransden, 1976, 176-177).

geminas...flammas: A sign of divine favour. Likely with a typological link to *Il.* 252-262, where Achilles is blessed by Iris, with flames pouring from his head as he rushes into battle (Fratantuono & Smith, 2018, 699).

patrium sidus: This can be associated with the *sidus Iulium*, a comet reportedly seen during the funeral games held for Caesar in 44 BC (Plut. *Caes.* 69.3; Suet. *Jul.* 88; Gransden, 1976, 177). This became part of Augustus' image campaign to communicate his deification, seen especially in poetry and coinage, and should thus be understood as a statement of the Iulian line's divinity (Pandey, 2013, 405).

[682]

The following three lines focus on Agrippa, Augustus' aide. Although Agrippa's secondary status is made clear, lines 682-684 are syntactically modelled on Augustus' depiction at 678-681, with the correspondence presenting him as a worthy and indispensable support (Gransden, 1976, 177).

parte alia: cf. *sequiturque* (688). Where both Augustus and Antony are introduced within the same structure - a quatrain beginning with *hinc* - their aides are each introduced differently (Eden, 1975, 180). This marks a difference in status, denoting them as secondary.

dis: cf. 679, Agrippa is also supported by the divine.

[683-684]

These lines balance the description of Augustus' headwear at 680-681.

arduus...agens: A particularly alliterative line.

arduus: cf. *stans celsa in puppi*; Augustus and Agrippa are depicted with similar visual imagery (O'Hara, 2018, 110).

agens: cf. 678. No finite verbs are used for Augustus or Antony, rendering their image timeless (Fratantuono & Smith, 2018, 697).

tempora: cf. 680

nauali...corona: The rostral crown was awarded to Agrippa in recognition of significant naval action after his defeat of Pompey at Naulochus in 36 BC, and he

was reportedly the first recipient of the honour (Pliny *N.H.* 16.3; Fratantuono & Smith, 2018, 702). This is a significant honour in itself, but one whose glory is aggrandised as it is paralleled with the divine honour of Augustus' headwear above.

[685-686]

The focus of the narrative shifts to Antony, with a quatrain structurally modelled on 678-681. Here, Virgil strikes a careful balance between Antony as a worthy adversary to Augustus – one powerful enough to pose a legitimate threat – and Antony as a traitor to Rome, reliant on foreign powers.

ope barbarica: Excessive wealth was something commonly associated with foreignness, cf. 8.659-661; 2.504 (Gransden, 1976, 187).

uictor: This word choice is of particular interest given that his Antony's campaign in 36BC had been at worst disastrous, and at best a questionable victory. In framing Antony as a threat, Virgil presents him as formidable enough to magnify Augustus' eventual victory at Actium (Eden, 1975, 184).

[687-688]

Aegyptum.../Bactra uehit: Where one might expect a description of Antony's headwear to balance those at 680-681 and 684, the lines devoted to Antony are concerned solely with the foreignness of allies (Eden, 1976, 183). These lines are concerned primarily with orientalisising and exoticising Antony's forces, when in reality Antony possessed the support of many Roman senators and soldiers (O'Hara, 2018, 109). This is an important element of the passage's political function; Augustus had gained control through a civil war, and the *Aeneid* was part of an ideological programme designed to justify his dominance of Roman politics (Erskine, 2002, 15). As such, Virgil legitimises Augustus' victory at Actium, presenting the battle as the victory of a united Italian nation under the rule of Augustus over a decidedly *foreign* enemy (Eden, 1976, 181).

ultima...Bactra: Antony and Cleopatra had no connection to Bactria, or indeed anywhere between the Oxus and the Hindu Kush (O'Hara, 2018, 111). *ultima* here demonstrates that, for Virgil, somewhere as distant and remote as Bactria might be considered the very border of the world (Fratantuono & Smith, 2018, 705).

[688]

Virgil's representation of Agrippa as Augustus' aide is contrasted by that of Cleopatra, to whom far less attention is devoted.

Aegyptia coniunx: That Cleopatra goes unnamed here, and again at line 696 where she is referred to as *regina*, is to be expected. The success of the Augustan ideological campaign against her and Antony entailed that Cleopatra was seldom named in Augustan poetry (Chaudhuri, 2012, 223).

(*nefas*): Virgil employs this term with relative frequency and in different contexts, with several instances of its use in exclamative parentheses seen across the epic (cf. 7.73; 7.569-597; 10.673). The prevailing understanding of the term is that it indicates something which could not be done without incurring the reaction of nature or the anger of the gods (Sini, 1991, 96-97). Thus, the intention of its usage should be best understood as something which contradicts social, natural, and even divine convention. Once again, the message here can be understood as a calculated othering of Antony and Cleopatra's forces as a means of conveying Augustan supremacy.

[689-690]

ruere; spumare: Historic infinitives express vivid action as the battle begins in earnest, with the battle narrative continuing after the passage (689-715) (Fratantuono & Smith, 2018, 707).

rostrisque tridentibus: cf. 5.143.

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