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Review

The Sybil in Aeneid Six

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This paper tracks how Vergil used his character Deiphobe Glauki the sibyl to comment on Aeneas' development as a hero through during his trip to the underworld in book six of the Aeneid. Deiphobe's name, affiliation, how she is characteristically referred to, her gender, her role as Aeneas' guide, and how she compares to other figures who belong to these generic categories are all relevant to her influence on Aeneas' development. Deiphobe also elucidates Aeneas' relationship with the goddesses Diana and Proserpina, the dead, including generic categories of dead people, figures already renowned from mythology, literature, and history, his father Anchises, and the Romans' mythic past.

Key words: Vergil, Aeneid, Latin, Literature, Gender, Homer, Mythology, Polytheism, Classics, Epic

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INTRODUCTION

In the *Aeneid*, Vergil creates a unique character in the form of the Sibyl Deiphobe Glauki, who appears to take a prominent role in book six, only to vanish inexplicably during the Heldenschau in Elysia (*Aeneid* 6), appearing as Vergil presents her in the *Aeneid* nowhere else before him. Vergil made her out of several other prophetic mythological figures, some of which appear elsewhere in the *Aeneid,* as well as generic characteristics associated with the transition between life and death, and female figures in ancient drama and mythology. Deiphobe was amalgamated from three different Sibyls: the Trojan Sibyl, sometimes identified with Cassandra, the Sibyl Marpessa, and the Sibyl of Cumae (Tenney, 1935). Deiphobe guides Aeneas through to Elysia, giving him instructions on what rituals he must observe in order to return from his trip to the underworld in her capacity as a prophetess of Apollo and an initiate of Diana (*Aeneid* 6.125-6.155). Vergil defines Deiphobe in relation to the categories of being to which she belongs and other figures in these categories. As the following paper will attempt to prove, she serves to focus and shape Aeneas' *katabasis,* which could have been confusing and amorphous in how it handles the metaphysical without Deiphobe and the focus and guidance she gives.

Vergil connects Deiphobe with two other prophetic figures, Helenus and Cassandra, on two levels. On the divine level, Deiphobe is linked to them through her relationship to both Apollo, the source of her prophecies, and through Diana, who is also syncretized to Apollo's twin Artemis. Deiphobe, along with Marpessa, Helenus and Cassandra was the object of Apollo's lust (Skulsky, 1987). His gift of prophecy to both Marpessa and Cassandra was an expression of sexual interest, with their response being influential in how the relationship with Apollo ends for the mortal sex-object. The god's interest in Helenus is never explicitly cast in sexual terms, although analogy with the other Trojan prophet, his sister, and the institution of Greek pederasty known to Vergil and his contemporaries is suggestive. Apollo's sexual interest in Helenus also might have been displaced onto Neoptolemus, who owned him after he was captured by the Greeks. His enslavement leads to his founding of Buthrotum, where Aeneas finds him, on Neoptolemus' behalf, and his rule of the same town after Neoptolemus' death (*Aeneid* 3.294-469). What distinguishes the three prophets is how each of their gifts of prophecy and the circumstances around it affect their social standing.

Marpessa, the first of these to be given prophecy, received it when she was taken from her husband on Mt. Ida by Apollo. She is then in the possession of Apollo and served as his prophetess, in which capacity she foretold Paris' destructive effect on the city of Troy.

Etymologically, her name comes from the verb μάρπτω, containing the idea of her as a snatched woman, which makes her a parallel figure to Helen. They are also linked through Marpessa being the prophetess who gives the instructions that lead to Paris being exposed, and hence his subsequent role in the abduction of Helen and the beginning of the Trojan War (Skulsky, 1987). This association between forcible relocation and prophets extends to one of the other prophetic figures in the *Aeneid* who tell Aeneas where to go, the Harpy Celaeno.

Celaeno, who as a Harpy is inherently on the captor side of a kidnapping, reinforces the association Vergil made with Marpessa being the captor as well as the captive. Celaeno's name is also significant etymologically, literally meaning "dark one" (Paschális, 1997), which is appropriate to her both as a harpy, which belong to the dark underworld and as a contrast with Phoebus, the god whose prophecies she gives. This suggestion of darkness foreshadows the contact Aeneas will have with the underworld in his katabasis, as well as the dark figures he will have contact with in the underworld (Headlam, 1902). The Aeneid is also the first time Celaeno is attested to as the name of a harpy, suggesting that it might be Vergil's invention (Paschális, 1997).

The irrational mixture of captor/captive roles characterizes how Vergil portrays the prophetic figures in the *Aeneid,* as being captive to Apollo, and captor of mortals as they give knowledge of inalterable fate and issue commands in a way that obliges them to obey. The same duality and contradiction of the roles of active captor and passive captive is more famously present in Helen, whose most troubling feature in myth is that it is often unclear whether she is acting as the subject or being acted upon as the object of exchange (Lyons, 1997).

Another seer Deiphobe is paralleled to in the *Aeneid* who is courted by Apollo is Cassandra, who rejected Apollo's advances after accepting his gift of prophecy. Apollo turns her gift into a curse by giving her forewarning of danger yet limiting her prophecies so as to be either not understood or believed in time to avert disaster. This irrevocability of the gift of prophecy despite the failure of reciprocity in this myth can be made sense of in relation to how the ancients etymologized Cumae's name and related it to the role of a Sibyl. They associated it with the words for pregnant (ἔγκυος), waves (κύματα), and pregnant woman (κύμας), which have swelling out in common with each other, and there are puns on this association between swelling in pregnancy and in waves and swelling with the god's influence during frenzied prophesying (Skulsky, 1987). As could be expected if Apollo's giving the gift of prophecy to the sibyl is seen as impregnating her in a sense, he cannot take back what he has given, only render it useless.

Vergil is sparing with this set of associations when describing Deiphobe's prophetic frenzy, but she is at Cumae, where the etymological associations are centered. He might also be drawing on the same traditional associations as Ovid does when he describes his prophetess Carmentis as *plena dei* (F. 6.537-38). To add to the confusing web of associations around the sibyl's ecstatic prophesying, the act of being possessed by Apollo also tends to be associated with the god taking control of his prophet sexually (Graf, 2009). Vergil manipulates both of these associations in his description of Deiphobe's frenzy, presenting it as an unnatural union of several stages in the reproductive cycle, conception, pregnancy, and birth.

Helenus accepts the god's gift, although in line with the *Aeneid*'s view on the relationship between piety and prosperity, Helenus' good relationship with Apollo does nothing to stop his fate of capture and enslavement by the Greeks (Adelaide, 1931). Helenus, a male, can be the recipient of the same unnatural pregnancy as the female sibyls, since it seems to be rooted in bringing prophetic knowledge into the world, instead of anything physical (Skulsky, 1987). Also worth noting is that the subtly sexually suggestive wordplay used when describing Deiphobe's prophetic state, and even prophecy through possession, is completely absent from the Helenus episode, showing some of Vergil's bias toward females being placed in compromising situations rather than males. As well, the contrast between how his enslavement still left him able to recreate Troy, and how the same condition led to Cassandra's death suggests that Helenus accepted the gift of prophesy better than she did.

The interpretation of prophetic frenzy as an unnatural pregnancy is reinforced by the subject matter of the carvings in Deiphobe's cave, the Pasiphae and bull story, as well as the other carved scenes that show parts of the Daedalus and Icarus myth (*Aeneid*: 6.14-6.34). They depict scenes associated with father/son relationships, this suggests something significant about the Sibyl as a female who leads Aeneas to his father in the underworld, being a reversal of the usual way a woman brings a son to his father in childbirth. Another link to the unnatural pregnancy theme is that Deiphobe is both emphatically described as a virgin (*Aeneid*: 6.45) before the episode of her prophesying under Apollo's influence and as being beyond childbearing age (*Aeneid*: 6.628, 6.321). Despite the continuous logical inconsistencies, Sibyl's role as prophetess bringing divine knowledge to the world, and as a guide bringing Aeneas to Anchises in Elysium, is paralleled to that of a woman having a baby.

Another connection between Aeneas' katabasis and his metaphoric rebirth to his father in Elysia is the importance of the water barriers to entrance to the underworld. Both the Styx and the crater lake of Avernus whose waters are said to mingle with those of the Styx are barriers to be

crossed by Aeneas with Deiphobe's help (*Aeneid*: 6.237-415), and a metaphorical substitute for the amniotic fluid that come out at a birth. In fact, the descent to the underworld is set as a return to the womb in two ways: the one just mentioned, and that it is a trip that leads to a cave; both are yonic symbols.

This use of both a cave and water barriers as set pieces in a heroic rebirth story has a Homeric model in Odysseus' delay and eventual exit from Calypso's island. Odysseus' stay on Ogygia is compared to a stay in the underworld, both through the way Calypso's cave is described to resemble the cavernous underworld of the Homeric underworld and through how he perceived as dead by all those outside of the island (Anderson, 1958). His solitary trip across the sea provisioned by Calypso that ends in Odysseus reaching the shore through the mouth of a river with the help of Leucothea parallels the trip of a baby reaching the outside world from the inside of his mother's womb through her birth canal. Odysseus is forced to abandon the raft, clothes and nourishment Calypso sends him off with for the protective veil and advice to swim to shore and then cast off given to him by Leucothea (Holtsmark, 1966). This casting off of his prenatal environment for a new life on the shore and collapse of womb and underworld is imitated in reverse by Vergil.

The specifics of the directions Deiphobe gives Aeneas for the return trip to the underworld reveal other things about the nature of the Sibyl's role in guiding him (Zarker, 1967). Before Aeneas can enter the underworld with any hope of leaving, he must make an animal sacrifice to Proserpina and bury a companion of his who has died unbeknownst to him. Just as crucially, he must find the Golden Bough to bring to the underworld as a gift for Proserpina (*Aeneid*: 6.136-6.139). Deiphobe gets this information from Hekate, who through her syncretism with Diana is a goddess in charge of the proper transitions between virginity, marriage, and motherhood for women. This relationship is significant because as the Sibyl goes about her function as Apollo's virgin prophetess/lover/mother of his prophecies she breaks the natural separation of these states that her patron goddess usually upholds. How Vergil has Diana both allow this to happen and support it through the aspect she shows as Hekate, and that the goddess involved changes from Diana/Hekate to Proserpina over the course of *Aeneid* six, suggests that Vergil intended for Diana to be involved through Deiphobe to make the transition from her realm to that of Proserpina with Aeneas (Lyons, 1997)[1]. It also shows that Diana proper is associated with the upholding of proper transitions and Hekate with manipulating them. Overall, the transition takes Aeneas from the sphere of influence of a goddess associated with virginity to one associated with fertility.

The fact that both sacrifices and the Golden Bough were to go to Proserpina is another nod to the connection Vergil is making between female characters and crossing the barrier between life and death, namely, that it belong to females to make such transitions, whether successful or unsuccessful. This idea that the liminal space between life and death is a female space is also shown in that the monsters Aeneas and Deiphobe pass just beyond the entrance to the underworld are prominently female, and personifications of things that bring people to the underworld, such as vengeance (the Furies) and famine (wrathful Ceres). The same thing is also shown in the first category of dead person to be introduced after the unburied, which is those who died in infancy, who are perpetually on the threshold, having died before the could have a life. They occupy the bank of the river Styx, which is as close to the world of the living as any of the dead can be[2].

A third instance of female control of the threshold between life and death is the planting of the Golden Bough at the entrance to Elysia as a gift for Proserpina, as well as its use as a passport throughout the trip. The Golden Bough, in its use as a passport, shows that Aeneas has divine favour from Proserpina for his descent through the underworld. Its planting at the entrance to Elysia to remain while Aeneas himself enters with the ability to leave when he was finished speaking to Anchises shows it being used as a substitute Aeneas who would remain in the underworld. This use of a magic wooden staff as an extension of, and hence a *pars pro toto* substitute for its owner is widespread among primitive thoughts about reaching the underworld, and is not uncommonly used as or along with an appeasement sacrifice to something that blocks the journey (Knight, 1935). The giving of the Golden bough to Proserpine also marks when control of Aeneas' katabasis passes from the Sibyl Deiphobe to Proserpine herself, who is presumably the one who allows Aeneas to return to the world of the living, as well as return the Golden Bough for the use of the next worthy hero.

As Deiphobe guided Aeneas to Elysium, he takes his place between the heroes of the Trojan War and his father in the past and the heroes of the Roman Empire in the future. The way the dead are organized in the *Aeneid* by category in specific regions of the underworld, along

[1] This transfer is especially appropriate when one considers that Proserpina's most famous myth, of her being abducted into marriage by Pluto, is centered on the successful completion of the transition between virginity and marriage, which is one of the transitions Diana guards.

[2] The inclusion of infants as a distinct category of the dead also reflects the reality of high infant mortality that the ancient Romans lived with.

with the eschatological explanations for how the souls came to be in each region, and will come to leave in the case of the heroes, has its precedent in Plato's *Phaedo* (57a-118a). The dead are sorted both by the timing and manner of their death and their virtue or sin in life, showing a concern for the connection both between death and fertility, like in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and between moral development and the path of the soul, like in the *Phaedo*. Deiphobe is a link between the living son and the dead father, making her in effect a surrogate mother to Aeneas. Once Deiphobe brings Aeneas to Anchises, Anchises takes over her role and starts answering Aeneas' questions, showing the primacy of the father/son relationship over his other significant relationship with a living person in the underworld.

Throughout her inclusion in the narrative, Deiphobe acts completely in her role as a faithful and pious servant of Diana and Apollo. She is only named once, when she is introduced, and is thereafter only referred to as *vates,* Sibyl, or by a variety of generic epithets for a holy woman (*Aeneid* 6), which has the effect of depersonalizing her as an individual to emphasize the importance of her role. Despite this, the name Vergil chose for his sibyl is significant. The name Deiphobe does not appear in any of the other sources that mention the Sibyl of Cumae, and was only used as the name of an important sibyl after Vergil, meaning his choice to name her Deiphobe must be significant to her role in the *Aeneid* (Coulter, 1950). As the feminine form of Deiphobus, whom Aeneas would encounter in the underworld, its mention would be a subtle hint to the audience that Deiphobus will be involved later in the poem. It would also suggest a connection to the competition between Deiphobus and Helenus over Helen after Paris' death, which ended in Deiphobus retreating to Mt. Ida in defeat, where he was captured by the Greeks and shared his prophetic knowledge of how the Greeks could defeat the Trojans (Clausen, 2002).

Vergil also gives her a patronymic, Glauki, which connects her to two figures named Glaukus as her father, the warrior on the Trojan side who elicits the leaves simile for the generations from Diomedes in book six of the *Iliad*, and the minor sea god associated with prophecy (Austen, 1986). The connection between two prophetic figures, especially in a way that also involves the sea, resonates with the associations that have already been explored above. The connection to Glaukus and the leaves simile points the reader towards reading what the sibyl is doing and the *katabasis* in general as a commenting on generations and the value of the past for the present (Harries, 1993). Judging by the reaction of the Trojan Glaukus' reaction to seeing Deiphobe (*Aeneid* 6.500- 6.547) Vergil is naming the prophetic sea god as her father.

In conclusion, Vergil writes his narrative of Aeneas' katabasis taking into account contemporary ideas as to how such a journey could be completed successfully. He reflects the gendered and easily confused religious and mythological ideas he was familiar with and uses them to build a dramatic, poetic, and believable trip to the underworld. Over the course of *Aeneid* six, Aeneas is always under the guardianship of a female, who is Deiphobe on the mortal level, and shifts from Diana to Proserpina on the divine level. Aeneas' *katabasis* bridges the gap between the Odyssean and Iliadic halves of the *Aeneid*, allowing him to be reborn as an Italian. Deiphobe is never mentioned after line 752[3] of book six, before the Heldenschau begins, suggesting that her role is confined to bringing Aeneas to Anchises.

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[3] Dixerat Anchises natumque unaque Sibyllam. Said Anchises to his son and one Sybil.

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