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THE HEAD OF MEDUSA: GORGON IMAGERY IN VIRGIL'S *AENEID*

Summary: The poet Virgil in his *Aeneid* employs Gorgon imagery and its attendant connection to the goddess Minerva as part of his explication of one of the key themes of his Augustan epic, namely the progress from a Trojan past to a Roman future. Close analysis of the references to the Perseus myth and related Gorgon legends in the *Aeneid* reveals a carefully constructed web of intratextual allusions that serve in part to underscore the end of the Trojan order and the advent of the Roman.

Key words: Virgil, *Aeneid*, Perseus, Medusa, Gorgons, Minerva

The epic story of the hero Perseus' decapitation of the monstrous Gorgon Medusa is one of the more enduring tales from classical mythology.¹ There are several references to this Gorgon lore in Virgil's *Aeneid*, careful consideration of which will illustrate certain aspects of the poet's concern with the problem of the fall of Troy and the inevitable rise of Rome, not least its renewal and *de facto* renaissance under

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¹ The earliest extant evidence for Perseus' slaying of Medusa is Hesiod, *Theogony* 270–281, complete with the dramatic emergence of Chrysaor and Pegasus from the neck of the beheaded monster. In Hesiod the heroic decapitation is localized somewhere in the distant West, near the Hesperides. The association of Gorgon imagery with the aegis of Pallas Athena is Homeric (*Iliad* V 738–742). Euripides has a version of the lore in which Athena slays “Gorgo” (*Ion* 987–1017, on which see, especially GIBERT, J. C.: *Euripides: Ion*. Cambridge 2019, 273–274). Pindar, *Pythian* X 46–48 has Perseus killing the Gorgon and then bringing “stony death” to the inhabitants of Seriphos; cf. the opening of *Pythian* XII (where Medusa is named). Homer never mentions Medusa, nor Perseus in connection with any sort of heroic exploit against a Gorgon. “Indeed, we cannot be entirely certain that Homer knew or thought of Gorgons as complete creatures, suitable for decapitating.” (GANTZ, T.: *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. Vol. I. Baltimore 1993, 304). Much of our knowledge of Perseus and Medusa lore is indebted to the surviving remains of Pherecydes (fr. 10–12 Fowler), and to the extended account of Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* II 34–42. For Aristophanes (*Ranae* 477), “Gorgon” was a fitting appellation to describe a demes-woman of notoriously unattractive countenance.

Virgil's patron Augustus.² The poet's employment of Medusan imagery, it will be demonstrated, follows a deliberate pattern that highlights the epic's overarching concerns with the transition from a Trojan past to a Roman future.

The first of the Virgilian allusions to Medusa comes amid the dramatic revelation of the divine forces that are at work in the ruin of Priam's Troy that Venus presents to her son Aeneas in his city's last hours. Prominent among these numinous destructive manifestations is the goddess Pallas/Minerva and her Gorgon avatar:

*iam summas arces Tritonia, respice, Pallas
insedit nimbo effulgens et Gorgone saeva.* (II 615–616)³

These verses contain a noteworthy ambiguity: is *saeva* nominative (of Pallas) or ablative (of the Gorgon)?⁴ *Saeva* of Pallas would follow on *saevissima* of Juno (II 612) – but regardless of where the force of the appellation is felt, both Pallas and Juno (alongside the Neptune of II 610–612) are depicted as hostile to Troy.⁵ Pallas takes her place on the heights, ready to aid in the city's ruin.⁶ Jupiter too (II 617) supplies arms to the Danaans as they execute their assault. This is, then, a rather one-sided “war”; the immortal powers are engaged in the destruction of Troy, and the vision of their divine wrath is granted to Aeneas by grace of his mother Venus' power – the mother offers her son a clear picture of why the situation is hopeless, even as she offers promise of his own salvation.⁷ Taking *saeva* of Pallas, both Juno and she are enraged with the Trojans, and eager to see the city destroyed once and for all.

The depiction of Tritonian Pallas with her Gorgon avatar is rich in complexity.⁸ There is storm imagery, as the goddess appears “in a cloud of brilliant light”⁹ – reading

² On Gorgons in Virgil cf. PELLETIER, E.: Gorgone. In DELLA CORTE, F. (ed.): *Enciclopedia virgiliana II*. Roma 1985, 784–786; WESTERVELT, H.: Gorgons. In THOMAS, R. F. – ZIOLKOWSKI, J. T.: *The Virgil Encyclopedia. Vol. I*. Malden, Mass. 2014, 569; LOWE, D.: *Monsters and Monstrosity in Augustan Poetry*. Ann Arbor 2015, 102–105; also PANOUSI, V.: *Vergil's Aeneid and Greek Tragedy: Ritual, Empire, and Intertext*. Cambridge 2009, 111–112.

³ All quotes from the epic are taken from CONTE, G. B.: *Publius Vergilius Maro: Aeneis*. Berlin–Boston 2019 (*editio altera*).

⁴ On this problem note HORSFALL, N.: *Virgil, Aeneid 2: A Commentary*. Leiden–Boston 2008, 444. On the rich Virgilian employment of the adjective see DE GRUMMOND, N.: *Saevus: Its Literary Tradition and Its Use in the Aeneid*. Diss. North Carolina, 1968.

⁵ The two goddesses are noteworthy as the losers in the fateful Judgment of Paris; cf. *Aeneid* I 26–27. For an interesting commentary on Aeneas' response to both of these deities, see DYSON, J. T.: *King of the Wood: The Sacrificial Victor in Virgil's Aeneid* Norman 2001, 44–46.

⁶ On the significance of her location, note PUTNAM, M. C. J.: *The Poetry of the Aeneid: Four Studies in Imaginative Unity and Design*. Cambridge, Mass. 1966, 38.

⁷ See here BLOCK, E.: *The Effects of Divine Manifestation on the Reader's Perspective in Virgil's Aeneid*. Salem, NH 1984, 56–157; also the perceptive commentary of THORNTON, A.: *The Living Universe: Gods and Men in Virgil's Aeneid*, Leiden 1976, 90–91 (with particular reference to Aeneas' attitude toward Troy), and the related analysis of SCAFOGLIO, G.: *Noctes Vergilianae: Ricerche di filologia e critica letteraria sull'Eneide* [Spudasmata 135]. Hildesheim–Zürich–New York 2010, 110–111.

⁸ “Un passo molto denso” (CASALI, S.: *Virgilio, Eneide 2: Introduzione, traduzione, e commento*. Pisa 2017, 287). The goddess is “Tritonis” at II 226, and “Tritonia” (as substantive) at II 171; cf. V 704 and XI 483 (adjectival Tritonia, as here).

⁹ So AUSTIN, R. G.: *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Secundus*. Oxford 1964, 237.

nimbo and not *limbo* ("hardly to be claimed as an ancient and respectable variant").¹⁰ The allusion to tempests reflects the connection of Pallas' Gorgon aegis with that of Zeus; in Homer the supreme god allows his son Apollo also to wield the dread shield, and possibly Athena too is accorded the same privilege – though it is not clear if her aegis is a different object, or indeed what the exact nature of the aegis is in all passages where it is referenced (the ambiguity may in part explain the genesis of the textual variant *limbo* for *nimbo*).¹¹

This depiction of Pallas' Gorgon in the terrifying vision of the last night of Troy is recalled in another scene of the epic, where Venus is occupied not in the task of saving her son and his family from a devastated city, but in the business of securing divinely forged weapons for him from her husband, the master craftsman Vulcan. Vulcan agrees to his wife's request, and he orders his Cyclopean work force to abandon current projects in favor of the new assignment of Aeneas' panoply – most importantly, of his spectacular shield. One of the (presumably temporarily) abandoned tasks is that of Pallas' aegis with its dread Medusan ornament:

*aegidaque horrifera, turbatae Palladis arma,
certatim squamis serpentum auroque polibant
conexosque anguis ipsamque in pectore divae
Gorgona desecto vertentem lumina collo.*

(VIII 435–438)

The Gorgon vignette here is twice as long as that of Book II; the present scene amplifies and clarifies the "rather compressed language" of its predecessor.¹² Vulcan's Cyclopes had been working on a thunderbolt for Jupiter (VIII 426–432); here the Jovian reference (once again periphrastic, cf. VIII 427 *genitor*) comes first. There is also labor on a chariot of Mars (VIII 433–434); Mars was not one of the gods identified in the scene of the ruin of Troy (perhaps out of respect for his lover Venus; there is a certain subtle charm in how the cuckolded Vulcan is able here to delay work on his rival's chariot, albeit so that arms may be forged for his wife's illegitimate son).

Pallas/Minerva is described in this scene as *turbata*, i.e., "disordered"; the aegis with its Gorgon emblem is the weapon of the goddess when she has "lost her serene composure."¹³ Not here is she an "allegory of reason".¹⁴ Certainly in the matter of the fall of Troy, the goddess was violently preoccupied with destructive endeavors; the intended purpose of the aegis work of Book VIII is, we might think, left ambigu-

¹⁰ HORSFALL (n. 4) 444. *Limbo* is attested as the reading of "alii" by Servius *ad loc.* The variant would, it seems, refer to the goddess' *peplum*. Both Henry and Ribbeck accept *limbo*, the former "despairing to make any sense out of the received reading." R. D. Williams considers the metonymy of *limbus* "most unnatural."

¹¹ See further here SULLIVAN, M. B.: Aegis. In THOMAS–ZIOLKOWSKI (n. 2) 13. Athena has a Gorgon-aegis at *Iliad* V 738–742. Cf. also here RUTHERFORD, R. B.: *Homer: Iliad Book XVIII*. Cambridge 2019, 136.

¹² So EDEN, P. T.: *A Commentary on Virgil: Aeneid VIII*. Leiden 1975, 131–132.

¹³ HENRY, E.: *The Vigour of Prophecy: A Study of Virgil's Aeneid*. Carbondale 1989, 97 (part of a valuable discussion of Gorgon imagery as it relates both to Minerva and to Neptune).

¹⁴ Cf. HARDIE, P.: *Virgil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium*. Oxford 1986, 99.

ous.¹⁵ Before we consider the significance of these two Palladian Gorgon passages in the context of Virgil's epic (not least the question of the source of the goddess' disorder), we may survey the remaining two references to Medusan lore in the *Aeneid*, both of which are nestled between these two Minervan scenes.

At the very threshold of the underworld, the Gorgons are among the frightening images of monsters and other calamities that greet Aeneas and the Sibyl as he commences his katabasis:¹⁶

Gorgones Harpyiaeque et forma tricorporis umbrae. (VI 289)

The Gorgons, the Harpies, and (presumably) the three-bodied monster Geryon are part of the ghastly retinue of hell's antechamber.¹⁷ Allegedly, Servius Danielis tells us, there were four more verses here (289a–d) that offered a dramatic expansion of the one-word mention of the Gorgons:¹⁸

*Gorgonis in medio portentum immane Medusae,
viperae circum ora comae cui sibila torquent
infamesque rigent oculi, mentoque sub imo
serpentum extremis nodantur vincula caudis.*

These lines have been impugned as being unworthy of Virgil and just possibly passable samples of first-century AD interpolators' craft.¹⁹ Certainly they reflect interest in the iconographical potential of one of the most luridly compelling monsters of classical mythology, whether the interest was Virgilian or that of some anonymous poetaster.²⁰ If Virgil did not compose them, it remains unclear why someone felt his passage needed poetic expansion. The verses would seem to fall into that small group

¹⁵ It was either mere repair work following its use in Book II, or (not a mutually exclusive possibility) preparation for use in a specific future engagement.

¹⁶ Cf. here Binder, G.: *P. Vergilius Maro Aeneis: Ein Kommentar, Band 2, Kommentar zu Aeneis I–6*. Trier 2019, 534–535 (with *inter al.* iconographical references).

¹⁷ For the significance of the localization of the shadowy monsters, note Kivuila-Kiaku, J. M.: *La représentation de l'espace dans l'Enéide VI de Virgile*. Paris 2015, 56–63. "A fine mysterious-sounding line, made more effective by the unexplained allusion to the 'ghostly three-bodied shape', suggesting Geryon, the giant killed by Hercules." (FLETCHER, F.: *Virgil, Aeneid VI*. Oxford 1941, 55). The Harpies had harassed the Trojans in Book III; the seemingly harmless nature of their dire portents and threats would not be revealed until the Trojan arrival in Italy and the episode of the "eating of the tables" (VII 107–134).

¹⁸ On the problems of these possibly if not probably fake lines note HORSFALL, N.: *Virgil, Aeneid 6, A Commentary*. Berlin–Boston 2013, 248–250. "... their grotesqueness and awkward construction is wholly against Virgilian authorship" (AUSTIN, R. G.: *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Sextus*. Oxford 1977, 123). Remigio Sabbadini thought that Virgil had indeed written these lines, only to have decided to delete them in favor of verses 282–289. Cf. also MYNORS, R. A. B.: *P. Vergili Maronis Opera*. Oxford 1969, xii.

¹⁹ Cf. GOMEZ GLANE, Y.: Virgilio *Aen.* 6, 289a–d: struttura, composizione, autenticità. *Materiali e discussion per l'analisi dei testi classici* 63 (2009) 175–190 (the most extensive study of the problem to date).

²⁰ See further here MURGATROYD, P.: *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature*. London 2007, 104–109.

of suspect lines that are part of the (relatively) early Virgilian tradition, though never accorded widespread acceptance as authentic lines.²¹

The Gorgons, at any rate, are suitable cameo horrors for the infernal regions.²² Ultimately none of the grim apparitions that greet Aeneas and the Sibyl are of any lasting consequence; the hero quickly moves past them after being told by Deiphobe that the monsters are, in fact, mere shadows without substance – there is no need of a hero's sword (VI 290–294). There already was a Perseus, a Jason, a Hercules – Aeneas would be fighting image and not reality were he to engage in combat with these portents.²³ The all too real Gorgon avatar of the preeminent battle goddess was wielded against Troy; now the Gorgons – albeit shadowy supernatural images without substance – seem to threaten the Trojan hero as he enters Avernus.

More serious in the context of the Trojan future is the Gorgon allusion that comes in *Aeneid* VII with reference to another infernal being, the Fury Allecto:

Exim Gorgoneis Allecto infecta venenis
principio Latium et Laurentis tecta tyranni
celsa petit ... (VII 341–343)

“Gorgons ... and Furies are of the same stamp.”²⁴ Allecto had been charged by the goddess Juno with instigating a war in Latium between Aeneas' Trojans and the Italians under the command of the Rutulian Turnus. “The Gorgon, a single monster in Homer, developed in legend into a sisterhood and acquired some of the attributes of the Erinyes.”²⁵ As with the image of Pallas/Minerva looming over Troy, once again there is an emphasis on height – the infernal specter will brood over Latium and the palace of the Laurentine Latinus (cf. VII 343 *celsa petit* and II 615 *summas arces*).²⁶ Allecto is literally “infected” or poisoned with the Gorgon's venom; she will spread that contagion to Queen Amata and indeed to Aeneas' antagonist Turnus. The underworld horror of Book VI – an insubstantial, shadowy pseudo-threat that Aeneas was advised was of no real consequence – has now been incarnated in the Junonian avatar Allecto, the infernal Fury who would play so great a role in the rebirth of the *Iliad* in Italy.²⁷ Shadow is converted to substance in the Allecto Gorgon passage; the Sibyl Deiphobe could fairly counsel her underworld tourist not to engage in pointless

²¹ Cf. the somewhat analogous case of the prefatory *Ille ego* passage.

²² Note on the sentinel-like aspect of the Virgilian infernal Gorgons CLARK, R. J.: The Cerberus-Like Function of the Gorgons in Virgil's Underworld (*Aen.* 6. 273–94). *The Classical Quarterly* N.S. 53.1 (2003) 308–309.

²³ There is a fine commentary on the scene of Aeneas ready to engage in battle with the shadows by MACKIE, C. J.: *The Characterisation of Aeneas* [Scottish Classical Studies 4]. Edinburgh 1988, 120–121.

²⁴ So HORSFALL, N.: *Virgil, Aeneid 7, A Commentary*. Leiden–Boston–Köln 2000, 238.

²⁵ FORDYCE, C. J.: *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Libri VII–VIII*. Oxford 1977, 126–127.

²⁶ For the “typological parallel” between the Gorgon imagery associated with Allecto and the Palladian aegis, see GRANSDEN, K. W.: *Virgil, Aeneid Book VIII*. Cambridge 1976, 142.

²⁷ On the Virgilian conception of these supernatural creatures, cf. BAILEY, C.: *Religion in Virgil*. Oxford 1935, 178–181.

swordplay with ghosts, but Allecto's Gorgonic poison is all too toxic and baleful to the Trojan exiles in Italy.

There are four Virgilian references to Gorgons, then, with the framing passages in Books II and VIII referring specifically to the goddess Pallas/Minerva. Those two occurrences come in the second books of the respective two halves of the poem. The other two allusions are placed in Books VI and VII, i.e. in the last book of the poem's first half and the first of its second. Those two Gorgon scenes involve "underworld" imagery: first the shadowy Gorgons at the threshold of Tartarus, and then the appearance of the Fury Allecto as she prepares to engender the war in Latium.

What draws together and provides explication of the significance of these references to the petrifying monster of Perseus' heroic victory is the dramatic depiction of divine combat on the shield of Aeneas that emerges from Vulcan's workshop (VIII 675–713).²⁸ The centerpiece of that shield is the glorious image of the Augustan victory at the Battle of Actium, replete with a scene of immortal intervention that parallels and indeed surpasses the picture of the gods that Venus unveiled to Aeneas at the fall of Troy. It is the second of the two scenes of divine combat in the poem, coming as it does once again in the second book of its respective half of the poem. On the shield, Neptune, Venus, Minerva, and Mars are all now on the same side: they do battle with the gods of Egypt, with Anubis and his monstrous retinue (VIII 698 ff.).²⁹ Indeed, the great god Apollo is there too, and the Dirae, alongside Discordia and Bellona. In one dramatic moment of history, Virgil brings together many of the various immortals and infernal powers who were not always engaged hitherto in corporate action – notably Venus, who of course was a spectator and not a participant in the last hour of Troy. The shield depicts a war within a war, as it were; the shield imagery presents the Roman future, which is the Roman past to Virgil and his contemporary audience – Actium being the recent past of a victory that sealed the ascendancy of the future Augustus.³⁰

The scene on the shield represent the defeat of Antony and his *Aegyptia coniunx* Cleopatra (who is left unnamed). She is in the very midst of the naval battle, though she does not, as yet, notice the twin snakes that lie in wait, as it were, at her back:

Necdum etiam geminos a tergo respicit anguis. (VIII 697)

The serpents cited here allude to the tradition of the queen's dramatic suicide by snakebite; they also connect to the Gorgon imagery the poet has carefully delineated.³¹ There are several subtle yet striking details to observe in this passage (which

²⁸ For commentary here note *inter al.* FRATANTUONO L. M. – SMITH, R. A.: *Virgil, Aeneid 8: Text, Translation, and Commentary*. Leiden–Boston 2018, 693–731.

²⁹ On the possible connection of the goddess name to *minitans armis* (highly appropriate in this context), see O'HARA, J. J.: *True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Word-play*. Ann Arbor 2017 ("new and expanded edition" of the 1996 original), 45.

³⁰ The title is proleptically accorded to the *princeps* (VIII, 678); the shield offers a virtually cinematic panorama of the future, and encapsulates temporally discrete events.

³¹ Cf. here NEWMAN, J. K. – NEWMAN, F. S.: *Troy's Children: Lost Generations in Virgil's Aeneid* [Spudasmata 101]. Hildesheim–Zürich–New York 2005, 139–140. The verb *respicit* at VIII 697 recalls the *respite* of II 615.

comes, like that of the fall of Troy in Book II, in the second book of its respective half of the epic). Not only are the Olympian gods now clearly on the same side, but Minerva (who is "Minerva" here – her purely Roman name – and not "Pallas") – does not wield the aegis with its Gorgon centerpiece.³² The only serpentine imagery of the battle narrative is reserved for the allusion to Cleopatra's Alexandrian suicide (which took place nearly a year after Actium – Virgil thus neatly conflates two discrete events into one on his quasi-magical shield). The twin snakes that brood behind Cleopatra remind one of the twin serpents of Pallas/Minerva that saw to the gruesome destruction of Neptune's priest Laocoon and his sons (II 199–227).³³ Egypt's queen will be vanquished by serpents, though not in the dramatic fashion of the Trojan priest and his children; hers will be a self-inflicted serpentine death.

Virgil has here carefully associated the snakes of Medusa with Cleopatra.³⁴ The serpentine imagery is divorced from explicit connection with Minerva, though its transference to Cleopatra does not divorce it from its destructive implications as part of the coming of order: Cleopatra may be reminiscent of Medusa, but just as Medusa was in some sense destroyed, so Egypt's queen will be vanquished by the western, Roman powers of reason – and the *turbata Pallas* has now been replaced with a more sedate picture of the goddess Minerva as part of said forces of order and the Olympian elimination of chaos. The infernal powers that had been summoned as part of the Junonian manipulation of Allecto to instigate the war in Latium are now depicted as raging amid the scene of the naval battle in the waters off Actium (VII 701).

We may now return to consider the significance of the abandoned projects of the Cyclopes that the forging of Aeneas' shield interrupted. In the immediate context of the Gorgon scenes of Books VII and VIII, a reasonable assumption is that the forge of Vulcan was devoted to the works of the Latin war that Juno's helper Allecto had helped to orchestrate. The immortals of Book II were involved in the Trojan War, and so also would they participate in the war in Latium. Divine interventions and interactions in the business of battle are peppered through the second half of the *Aeneid*, as the immortals struggle to react to events in Italy and interact with both their favorite and their accursed mortals.

The Latin war was centered on the conflict between Aeneas' Trojan exiles and the inhabitants of the new home they found in Hesperia. Pallas/Minerva certainly had shown herself to be hostile to the Trojan cause.³⁵ The goddess' Gorgon emblem is of

³² Interestingly, Jupiter – the supreme god whose particular armament was the aegis – is the one deity who is not referenced in the scene. Cf. here HEJDUK, J.: *The God of Rome: Jupiter in Augustan Poetry*. Oxford 2020, 198.

³³ On this episode and the Virgilian depiction of the fall of Troy see ZINTZEN, C.: *Die Laokoon-episode bei Vergil*. Wiesbaden 1979, 49 ff.

³⁴ "The snake-haired Medusa ... in the decorations of the Temple of the Palatine Apollo (Antiquarium Palatino, Room V) was perhaps intended to represent Cleopatra. The "Farnese Cup" (an Alexandrian agate-sardonyx cameo), now in Naples ... already has an image of Medusa on the outside and inside an allegorical scene set in Egypt" (NEWMAN-NEWMAN [n. 31] 140 n. 5).

³⁵ An iconic example of her indifference (at best) to Troy is depicted at I 479–482, where she ignores the offerings made to her by the Trojan women. See further on the relationship of the goddess to Troy, FRATANTUONO, L.: *Pallasne exurere classem: Minerva in the Aeneid*. *Arctos* Vol. LI (2017) 63–88.

ambivalent associations; heroes slay monsters (so Perseus, and we may compare the attempted attack of Aeneas against the shadow Gorgons of Book VI) – but the Gorgon was slain once by the Argive Perseus, and now the Medusa head is a decoration of the battle goddess' aegis. Aeneas tried to fight the insubstantial Gorgons in the underworld; the vanity of that effort relates to the connection of the already slain monster to the goddess.³⁶

The war between Aeneas and the forces mustered under Latinus' would-be son-in-law Turnus is not resolved until the climactic single combat of Book XII. But the vision on Aeneas' shield reveals the future history of Rome, a history of which Aeneas and the other characters of the "epic present," as it were, are unaware.³⁷ The future Rome will be Italian in *sermo* and *mores*, not Trojan; this significant detail of the ultimate settlement between Juno and Jupiter is not revealed until XII 833–840). The shield of Aeneas reveals a future that is eminently Italian: the western forces under Augustus and Agrippa battle an eastern enemy in Cleopatra and the contingents allied under the implicitly traitorous Mark Antony.³⁸ This new war is fought in the waters off northwestern Greece; it is in some sense another east-west struggle like the war at Troy in the heroic age.³⁹

By the time of Actium, there are no disputes or internecine conflicts between the Olympians; they are all united in divine combat against the grotesque, half-animal deities of Cleopatra's Egypt. The Olympian immortals would continue to play various roles in the "present" timeline of the Latin war, as that conflict continues to unfold in *Aeneid* IX–XII. The shield that Vulcan's Cyclopes produced is a glimpse of a future that is, as yet, quite removed in time from Aeneas and Turnus.⁴⁰ The serpentine associations inherent to the Gorgon image are associated on the shield with Cleopatra; she is a figure with affinities to Medusa and Medea before her (indeed, also to the Carthaginian Dido) – but just as Medusa was destroyed, so too will Cleopatra meet her end.⁴¹ The serpentine associations of Minerva with her Gorgon avatar are not to be found on Aeneas' shield; the aegis of the goddess was a project that was interrupted to give priority to the fashioning of Aeneas' shield. On this new divine armament, the snakes that recall Medusa and the monstrous Gorgon head are now, like the serpents that destroyed Laocoon, ready to slay a new foe of Minerva, this time the Egyptian queen who had dared to make war on Rome.⁴² The reference to the

³⁶ A recurring theme of both halves of the *Aeneid* is how Aeneas has arrived too late to do what certain of his heroic predecessors (e.g., Odysseus) had already achieved.

³⁷ Cf. VIII 730, of Aeneas as *ignarus* of the images on his new shield.

³⁸ On the complex interplay here both temporally and typologically, note PUTNAM, M. C. J.: *Virgil's Aeneid: Interpretation and Influence*. Chapel Hill 1995, 163.

³⁹ See further here BINDER, G.: *Aeneas and Augustus: Interpretationen zum 8. Buch der Aeneis*. Meisenheim am Glan 1971, 239 ff.

⁴⁰ On the temporal problems inherent in this depiction see DI CESARE, M. A.: *The Altar and the City: A Reading of Vergil's Aeneid*. New York 1974, 154–155.

⁴¹ For the Dido-Cleopatra connection, cf. GIUSTI, E.: *Carthage in Virgil's Aeneid: Staging the Enemy under Augustus*. Cambridge 2018, 14 (a good introduction to a vast topic).

⁴² The serpents that killed Laocoon and his sons were commissioned, to play their role in the ultimate fate of Troy; Laocoon's would-be intervention against the Wooden Horse was an attempted forestalling of the city's ruin.

goddess' aegis in the forge of the Cyclopes was to the weapon of *Pallas turbata*; the goddess of the shield is Minerva in a state of supreme confidence as she joins her fellow Olympians in battle against Cleopatra/Isis, Anubis, and the other gods of Egypt.

We have noted the absence of Jupiter from the depiction of Actium on the shield. Juno, too, is missing.⁴³ Apollo was the patron deity of the Augustan program and the victory at Actium; he is accorded the prime place of honor in the representation of immortal combat (VIII 704–705), and the absence of Jupiter and Juno helps to secure his preeminence. There may also be a subtle nod to the association of Jupiter with Augustus, which was a feature of Octavian's propaganda even before Actium.⁴⁴ Augustus at Actium in some sense stands in for the supreme god. The shield of Aeneas heralds a new age for the Rome whose Italian future will be guaranteed in the colloquy of Jupiter and Juno in the climactic divine scene of *Aeneid* XII. That colloquy ensured the Italian character of the future Rome; the shield that Aeneas bears reveals that Italian, Roman future.⁴⁵ Virgil does not make explicit why the Cyclopes were working on the *turbatae Palladis arma* when they were interrupted because of the shield commission; whatever the occasion for the work, in the absence of Pallas' Gorgon aegis from the fray, scope has been given to Allecto and Cleopatra to play with serpents, as it were.⁴⁶

The aegis of Pallas/Minerva enshrines a force of fury and madness that is in an important sense in the custody of reason; the Junonian employment of the Fury Allecto was an unleashing of rage so as to facilitate a savage new war. Allecto – like the Gorgon Medusa – has snaky hair, and indeed she shows Turnus two snakes from her tresses as part of her horrifying revelation of her true form.⁴⁷ The twin serpents of Allecto relate to those that menace Cleopatra; indeed the vision of Allecto essentially petrifies Turnus' visage (and so Virgil notes *deriguere oculi*, of literally the "stiffness" of the hero's eyes).⁴⁸ Allecto serves in a sense as a *de facto* Medusa – not surprising given Virgil's explicit reference to her Gorgon attributes – and the "twin snakes" with which she threatens Turnus reflect both back to the reptilian horror of Laocoon's death, and forward to the end of Cleopatra.⁴⁹ Three "twin serpent" passages, then, that relate to important moments in the progress of history: first the death of Laocoon,

⁴³ Both deities figure in the opening movements of Book IX, with respect to Juno's rousing of Turnus via her messenger Iris, and Jupiter's interaction with Cybele regarding the fate of Aeneas' ships.

⁴⁴ On this cf. ZANKER, P.: *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. Ann Arbor 1988, 53–56.

⁴⁵ Cf. VIII 626 *illic res Italas Romanorumque triumphos*. The inherent ironies of how the Trojan patroness Venus commissioned this shield for her Trojan hero son are obvious.

⁴⁶ The aegis may be in the forge for repairs after its use in the fall of Troy; work on it and the weapons of Jupiter and Mars may mirror the busy war preparations on the mortal plane in the wake of the outbreak of the conflict in Latium. Whatever the significance of the detail about Pallas' aegis, it will not figure on the shield of Aeneas, where snakes are associated only with Cleopatra and her self-destruction.

⁴⁷ VII 450 ... *et geminos erexit crinibus angues*.

⁴⁸ VII 447. Cf. Seneca, *Agamemnon* 715 (with A. J. BOYLE, Oxford, 2019, *ad loc.*).

⁴⁹ Cf. II 203 ff., 225; VIII 697. See here especially Horsfall's notes *ad* VII 450 (n. 24; not least on the iconography of the Furies).

which serves to presage the fall of Troy; lastly the death of Cleopatra, whose fall in August of 30 BC in an important sense heralded the dawn of an Augustan Age. Pallas/Minerva is involved in the ruin of Laocoon and his sons; she is also part of the divine array fighting Cleopatra. She is not incontrovertibly linked to the death of Turnus at the close of the epic, though here, too, some have seen the goddess' hand in Aeneas' slaying of his Rutulian foe.⁵⁰

All three of these key passages in the Virgilian presentation of the arduous, long march from Troy to Augustan Rome rely on Gorgon imagery. Troy must fall, and definitively so; not only will the city of Priam and Paris be ruined, but the future Rome will not be Trojan in language or customs. Cleopatra of Egypt must ultimately be defeated to make way for the conclusive end of the Roman civil wars and the establishment of peace under Augustus. Turnus must die (so also, prominently, the Volscian Camilla) – though in many ways his side in the Latin war will be proven victorious, and the Ausonian Italian cause will triumph over that of Aeneas' Troy.⁵¹ In this triad of “twin snake” deaths, then, Turnus stands out as the ambivalent figure, the “victor” in the sense of the final settlement of the affairs of *sermo* and *mores* in the future Rome, even in the face of his death and personal destruction. This ambivalence is reflected in the careful manner in which Virgil organizes and highlights his Gorgonic, serpentine imagery. Pallas/Minerva is explicitly involved in the ruin of Laocoon and Cleopatra, and only allusively – at best – connected to that of Turnus. Further, the Gorgon, Medusa lore is reserved for the fall of Troy and for Allecto's instigation of the war in Italy; in the narrative of *Aeneid* VIII, the goddess' Medusan aegis is put aside so that work can commence on the shield that will feature prominently Minerva's victory over Cleopatra, whose destruction will come ultimately from twin snakes that the queen applies directly to herself – Medusa in some sense slaying Medusa.

Fittingly, then, Virgil thus proceeds from the interruption of work on the Gorgonic *turbatae Palladis arma* to the stunning presentation of Actium on Aeneas' shield, with the snakes that menace Cleopatra in prominent relief. Allecto may have quasi-petrified the ultimately doomed Turnus, but Egypt's Cleopatra is a self-made fury, a would-be vanquisher of Rome whose ultimate serpentine ruin would come at her own hand.⁵² By the end of the poet's epic reflection on the nascent Rome, Troy would be once and for all finished, and eastern forces of disorder marshalled against

⁵⁰ Cf. Aeneas' declaration at XII 948–949 that it is “Pallas” who sacrifices Turnus; notwithstanding the declensional and accentual differences in the nearly homonymous names. On the possible lurking of the goddess at the poem's close see further FRATANTUONO (n. 35) 84–88.

⁵¹ Cf. here TRAINA, A.: *Virgilio: l'utopia e la storia: Il libro XII dell'Eneide e antologia dell'opere* (Bologna 2017, reprint of the 2004 second edition), 176; also TARRANT, R.: *Virgil: Aeneid, Book XII*. Cambridge 2012, 304–305.

⁵² For the significance of the twin snakes in Egyptian royal emblems, see NISBET R. G. M. – HUBBARD, M.: *A Commentary on Horace, Odes, Book I*. Oxford 1970, 419. In an important sense, then, Cleopatra seeks to appropriate serpentine imagery from such figures as Minerva, only to experience auto-demolition by the very means she sought to employ against Rome. On Lucan's Cleopatra as *Latii feralis Erinys* (*Bellum Civile* X 59), see HIGHET, G.: *The Speeches in Vergil's Aeneid*. Princeton 1973, 165.

Italian Rome would be defeated in the glorious array of the Augustan fleet at Actium, ships that were decorated with the image of the very goddess whose very aegis breastplate heralded her conquest of chaos and the triumph of reason.⁵³

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⁵³ For the surviving bronze prow “dredged up from the outer bay at Actium” and now in the British Museum, see WALKER, S. – HIGGS, P. (eds): *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth*. Princeton 2001, 264–265. The prow ornament seems to depict either Minerva or Roma, and is complete with aegis. “It has always been assumed that the prow comes from a sunken ship that participated in the battle of Actium.”