THE RELUCTANT BOUGH

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Book 6, poised between the wanderings and the wars,[1] is central to the Aeneid, and within this crucial book the golden bough plays a strangely crucial part. We learn of it in four elegantly related scenes. The first two deal with the plucking of the bough, and each offers a description. In the first, the Sibyl is in control, in the second, Aeneas acts. Tellingly, the Sibyl's description is objective, whereas in the second passage the bough is described through its sensory effects. The second pair of passages describe the use of the bough, and again the Sibyl is at the center of the first passage (she has the bough and reveals it to Charon), while Aeneas acts in the second. In the first of these, Aeneas passes into Hades, and in the second he passes into Elysium.

That second passage is won by dedicating the bough to Proserpina, and in a sense this ritual act is the meaning of the bough. Virgil stresses that it is a gift (munus, 142; dona, 632) for Proserpina. She is pulchra (142), likely a cult title, and she has stipulated the rite (instituit, 143; praecepta, 632). When Aeneas sets the bough on her threshold, the verb used (figit 636) is the one for temple dedications, and his purification there recalls (spargens, 230) the funeral ritual for Misenus, which also involved a bough. The branch, then, is the one used in the Mysteries, and through them is linked to Augustus, who was an initiate.[2]

It is linked as well to Plato, who exploited the links between philosophy and the Mysteries,[3] because when Aeneas passes to Elysium by placing the bough, he finds there a Platonic world of reincarnation and purgation. The power of the bough to reveal this world is suggested by a delicate allusion. The 'aureus ramus' is also the χρύσειον κλῶνα of Meleagar's

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[1]Brooks p. 143.

[2]Much of this is drawn from West's discussion (p. 11-12).

[3]See for example Symposium 210A.

Garland,[4] an anthology of lyrics that included poems by Plato. Meleagar's introduction to the collection describes each poet as a flower in the garland,

> And also the ever-golden branch of divine Plato,
> Bright all around with his excellence.

But the bough could be Proserpina's and Plato's, and still be a part of the natural world. Virgil has chosen instead to make it a metal bough, and to stress this aspect of its nature in both descriptive passages: it is made of gold foil (metallo, 144; brattea, 204). West sees the importance of this when he is arguing against free interpretations of the mistletoe simile (more of that shortly), but he has trouble focusing on the fact itself. Virgil is uncompromising about this. The Sibyl explains to Aeneas "primo auulso non deficit alter/aureus, et simili frondescit virga metallo" (143-144). The bough grows like a living thing (auricomos fetus, 141) and this simply sharpens the strangeness of the object. So when Virgil says "sic leni crepitabat brattea vento" (209), he stresses how peculiar the bough is, and how peculiar it seems.

The description of the wind in the metal leaves is the last element in a simile far stranger than West[5] gives it credit for being. He is battling the identification of bough and mistletoe, so as to keep European and Norse folklore out of the Aeneid, and is betrayed into a narrow reading that "will not do." The simile is not about the appearance of gold against the green of the oak: only bad similes work that way. The emphasis isn't visual, it is sensory, and this is emphasized exactly because the sound of the bough has no analogue within the simile. The time of the simile is not "brumali frigore" because it has to be for the mistletoe to be yellow. Only bad poets write that way. Within the simile,

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[4]The allusion was first noticed in the '40s by Michels. The Greek text of the couplet I quote runs:

> ναὶ μὴν καὶ χρύσειον ἀεὶ θείοιο Πλάτωνος
> κλῶνα, τὸν ἐξ ἀρετῆς πάντοθι λαμπόμενον,

[5]West p. 5-6.

the world's whole sap is sunk, in Donne's phrase. What is happening here is that the concrete descriptions of the Sibyl are now within the simile; outside it, in the world described, a strange queasiness of sensation obtains: "discolor unde auri per ramos aura refulsit", "species auri frondentis", "crepitabat brattea". For this reason too, at the dead of the year, Aeneas is seeking the spot "ubi pinguem dives opacat/ramus humum,"[6] looking not for the bough but for the shadow it casts. Without pinning too much on the word mistletoe, we find that the simile stresses Aeneas' strange experience of the bough, as well as its disconnected fecundity and its shining but shadowy nature.

The simile sets the scene for the plucking of the bough, a moment that has long puzzled scholars because the bough is described as "cunctantem" (211). How can this be reconciled with "volens facilisque" (146)? Servius saw the bough as 'delaying' compared to "Aeneas avidus". Others have seen violated beauty yielding with regret, or Virgil's inconsistency poetic practice, or narrative heightening consistent with a folktale motif.[7]

Whatever the explanation, it is clear that obtaining the bough is linked somehow with the death of Misenus. Both are prerequisites for reaching the underworld (140 ff, 154 ff) and their stories are intertwined. When Aeneas, out cutting wood with his men for Misenus' pyre, associates the two commands of the Sibyl(187 ff), the birds appear and guide him to the bough. Servius saw this and mentions that popular opinion connected Virgil's story with a grove near Rome where the priest had come to office by killing his predecessor, and would be killed in turn. This suggestion provided the seed for Frazer's Golden Bough, but by the third edition he had abandoned his premise.[8] Still, it is clear that Misenus and the golden bough are related. Old companion of Hector, he represents the old order, the "curse

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[6]The bough hides and is hidden (qui veste latebat, 406).

[7]John D'Arms, Avery, and Segal (1968) respectively.

[8]Conway 41-48 is an entertaining account.

of the dead city"[9] that must be expiated before Aeneas can descend.

When he does descend, the Sibyl carries the bough (why, I wonder) and shows it to Charon. "Ille admirans venerabile donum/fatalis virgae longo post tempore visum" (408-9). Brooks speculates[10] that the phrase is meant to show simply that the bough belongs in the underworld. Or does it refer to other visitors? Or to the Sibyl herself at her installation (565)?

It is curious that the bough is only needed until Aeneas reaches the borders of Elysium, and that Virgil's method of extracting his hero from the underworld is even more problematic than the bough. The current prevailing view of the gates seems to be Tarrant's: Aeneas and the Sibyl depart via the gate of ivory (for false dreams) rather than the gate of horn (true shades) because, in the Platonic schema that Virgil has designed to queer the pitch of the subsequent parade of heroes,[11] Aeneas is not a true shade. That is, he has not undergone the necessary purgation and cannot leave by the gate of horn. I wonder whether the source passage in the Odyssey (19.559 ff) doesn't have more to contribute here.

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[9]Brooks p. 158. Segal's derivative discussion (p. 634-42) would set up an opposition between success and failure, and sees Misenus' modest fame as a comment on the inadequacies of history.

[10]See p. 155.

[11]See Feeney's discussion, where Tarrant's views are endorsed.